Springfield Presbyterian Church

January 22nd, 2023

The Light that Shines in the Darkness

1. Introduction

As a pastor, I find it’s always hard to get back into your groove as

you enter the pulpit after a week or two away. Folks have asked me, “Was your time away restorative and restful?” and I quickly shake my head, “No. It was an intensive week. It was…intense.” And this past week was intense, more intense than academic debate and deep learning, it challenged the very core matters of justice, humanity, and redefining the word Theology.

Let me share with you the brief story. It was Thursday and my cohort entered our class, “Communication: Inspiring Change.” The speaker that day was invited by our professor and he serves as a pastor of a multi-ethnic megachurch in Indiana. I would never want to lead a megachurch, but I thought – hey, if he can help me engage in some multi-ethnic conversations in a place like Carroll County, that’s a win.

So, we all listened, and then one of my cohort students asked him, “What do you do when you face a big topic like LGBT matters?” Now, I have no idea why he asked that, but that was the question where everything went downhill. The speaker’s initial response was, “I preach the Bible.” Now, as a progressive Christian, I know that means, “I am not affirming.” It could have stopped there, but it didn’t.

The speaker then went into a monologue that LGBT people are like “fornicators and robbers and thieves” and I won’t go on to share with you the rest of what he said because it’s harmful and you get the idea. The cohort went into shock and at some point, I walked out of the room with some of my peers until 30 minutes later when he was finished with his monologue.

When we re-entered the classroom and he was no longer in the room, we were asked by the professor what we thought. My levity is – never ask a woman from Jersey what she thinks because…oh boy. My voice quivered, I stood before my cohort of 30, and I said, “As a bi-sexual woman, that is the rhetoric that has made four of my LGBT friends in Scotland take their life…it isn’t an issue, it is not a theology, we are people. Allowing the speaker to continue to speak was not a matter of censorship or free speech – it comes down to how you say things, words matter – and that was hate speech.” I sat down, I collected myself, and I received push back. And, of course, there are 29 other stories in the room, built from experience, and I can’t cover everything here in this sermon, but I think I’ve presented a picture for you to consider of the dilemma I find myself in today.

I left that week and as I was driving from Durham to Parkton, I thought, “Where is the light here? Where is the good news? What am I called to do? Where is God in the midst of this?” I have yet to find any answers to those questions, but we are only a week out.

1. Sharing a Story

Now, you might say, “Pastor Becca, a sermon isn’t a therapy

Session”, but that’s not why I’m sharing this story before you today. I share it because I imagine you have been in rooms like this, whatever the case may be, where you have had to leave or stand up, or have wondered what you are called to do. I do not think, while I wish it was, I do not think my story is one that has never been encountered before. I want to ask with you, where is God in this?

Well, it felt like God spoke to me right through Isaiah and the Gospel lesson today. There is indeed darkness in this world, there are people who will speak hatred, but my friends, the good news, even when you cannot feel it is that there is a tremendous light that can overcome any darkness. My prayer for my experience and for any experience you may have had that is similar, is that we find where the light is seeping through and run wildly towards it, living into the Good News. Let us see the light even when that means we need to speak up for justice or do the hard work that disciples of Christ are called to do.

Isaiah, in his own particular context, is speaking to a people who are bringing in a new king, Hezekiah, and while other prophets have considered, and rightfully so, kings to be corrupt, Isaiah sees something else within this new leader. Yet, it is also clear that there is a greater vision for Isaiah, one where the king of the heavens will reign in this way. There will be a time where light shines upon people clothed in darkness, joy will be multiplied, the nations will be filled with people. These people will rejoice just like they do when a new harvest is brought in, because there is no longer a rod across their back – there is no longer stress or strain, but freedom and a light so radiant that holds them. So yes, Isaiah is hopeful about this new king, Hezekiah, but his eyes and prophecy are moving toward the heavens.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus remembers those words of Isaiah. Jesus, himself, would have been a bit of a scholar in the synagogue – he knew these words, the power and the legacy that would have been running right through them as he speaks about them again. Jesus has also gone through trials himself as he remembers these words, for the passage before the one we hear today was the temptation of Jesus from Satan. He just encountered darkness in his life and he, Jesus, who is embodied light, has extinguished that darkness and is ready to begin ministry.

So, Jesus meets the words of Isaiah with the words he speaks now, when he tells all to repent, because heaven has come near, the prophecy has indeed become fulfilled. And in that spirit, he goes on to call two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, common fishermen, to this work of bringing light into this world through teaching, preaching, and healing.

1. Living into the Word

My friends, I’m not sure about you, but that’s good news that I

needed to hear this past week. Light has been prophecied and through Jesus, we are called to be light-bearers. The only bummer of that news in my mind is that being a light bearer comes with its own set of responsibilities. To bear light means we need to help extinguish darkness. To bear light means we need to be justice minded so that all people may have that rod across their back broken and all may thrive. To bear light means we are relentless, we continue to proclaim the goodness of God and the hope, joy, peace, and love that we know to be at the core of our faith.

If you ask me after service how I’m going to bear light during this time at Duke, I’m not sure I have an answer yet. I know I’m called to the work, but I’m still discerning how to do that and do it in a way where God is exalted. Here’s one of the great parts of community – if you have any ideas, I’m totally open. This is where telling our stories together, especially at prayer time and fellowship open the door from our solo Christian life to life together. So, in short, I’m discerning, but open to suggestions.

Moving beyond myself and this story, my question to you is – when have you found yourself in a situation like this? When have you found yourself to be an advocate or a light-bearer? Looking back, are there things you would do differently or ways you would act after growing a little older and wiser? This self-reflection is key, because to live this life as a disciple of Christ happens in real time, it is a boots-on-the-ground call, and when those moments come, it’s good to have already considered the ways in which you could be a light-bearer.

I’d like to finish up by sharing words that my husband shared with me from George Fox, the father of Quakerism, that speak to both of our Scripture lessons today. I have found them to be beautifully artistic and helpful to consider and I pray that the following image resounds in your mind as you consider your call in this world. George Fox said, “I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness.” May we all e sources of light and love in this world. Amen.