

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020

(John 1:6-8, 19-28)

For anyone wanting to preach specifically on John the Baptist this morning, the shape of our Gospel pericope is perfect. In these 13 verses we have the introduction of this wilderness prophet, a summary of the scrutiny he endures from the priests and Levites about his identity, and his proclamation that someone greater than he – someone who was there *standing among them* – was coming after him.

But for someone like me who wants to preach back into the earlier verses of this chapter ... someone who wants to preach light to those living in darkness ... I feel the boundaries of this morning's passage are wrong. In looking at where we begin this morning we are given no context. We hear that John is testifying to the light – but from where does the light come? Instead of verses six, seven and eight being placed at the beginning of the reading, a pericope focusing on the light should instead have them at the end. It is to the light I am looking this morning and to do that let me begin by offering a new framework for the Gospel reading.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*¹

Going back to the beginning of this chapter takes us even further back, back to the moment of creation. In the beginning of John we hear strong echoes of Genesis 1 and the *beginning of everything*. Think back to those first moments of time when God began the process of bringing order to chaos, and remember the first words spoken by God. *Let there be light.*² Before there was a separation of earth and sky and sea, *there was light*. Before there were plants and animals, *there was light*. Before there was humankind, *there was light*. Before there were even sun and moon and stars, *there was light*.

Light was at the beginning of Genesis, and light is at the beginning of John. Throughout history light and the darkness it drives away have been understood in different ways. Philosophers such as Seneca, Plutarch and Philo saw light as the result of “true knowledge”³ and “darkness as ignorance.”⁴ Darkness and light have been considered as imagery for the concepts of evil and good. Certain Jewish tradition emphasized the light that comes from both Wisdom and the Law, pointing to God speaking to Moses from a flame, Torah appearing as fire, and the Ten Commandments delivered through lightning.⁵

¹ John 1:1-8 (NRSV).

² Genesis 1:3 (NRSV).

³ Craig S. Keener. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 382.

⁴ Keener, p. 383, fn. 193.

⁵ Keener, p. 385, fn. 219.

Here, in John's Gospel, it is all brought together. Creation and Word; knowledge and law; wisdom and light: all are joined in Jesus. As John told the priests and Levites, he himself was not the light ... but he was the one standing and pointing out that the light was coming. In the world at that time, Jesus was the light that would come and pierce the darkness.

Now, 2,000 years later, many in this time and this world are experiencing darkness once again. Illness and death; anxiety and depression; fear and longing; sorrow and loss: these are the signs and symptoms of the chaos swirling around us. Like those moments before God first spoke the words of creation, many feel they are living once again in a time that in his translation of Genesis the scholar Robert Alter describes as being when "The earth was welter and waste and [there was] darkness over the deep."

But there is good news ... good news in the declaration of John and good news that is the Gospel. The hope for us ... the assurance for us ... is that in this season of waiting, the Word that was incarnate as Jesus and has already come will be the light that is Jesus coming again. The darkness will be cast aside. Shadows will be turned into morning. Once more we will hear the words of God, "Let there be light!"

The candles of this Advent wreath already bear flames that shine into the darkness of this season. Hope, peace, joy and love are the lights that vanquish hopelessness, chaos, sorrow and indifference. With each week that passes and with each new candle we light, we move ever closer to the beginning. We begin to speak less and listen more for the voice of the incarnate Word. We move slowly through the crowd that has gathered around John looking for the one standing among them that we don't yet know ... and yet is the one who already knows and loves us.

The light will come. We will see it. Like a flame we will feel it. And like John, we will testify to it.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word is life and light.

Amen.