

“A Different Life”

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18;
Matthew 4:12-23

January 22, 2017
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Christmas was a great time. I think about how the church transforms at the beginning of Advent, and it feels like it transforms out of that holiday when we take down the decorations. All of a sudden it's over.

It's a great holiday, though. It's a wonderful moment. It's a time to get together, and to worship together, and to be with family or friends, and to think about the joy that God brings into our lives. And then it's over. And then, what comes next?

The reason it's such a great holiday and such a great moment is because it's that moment, like the dawn of a day, when the great light starts to shine. It's a moment when newness is noticed.

What I notice is that over the years I've known this great light in various ways, but it feels like there are always times I find myself back under the shroud of darkness. It's a little like I go into a room and slowly let the light fade, and I let things accumulate in my life, and I don't even see them because it's kind of dark in there. I start tripping over things, or I can't find something I'm looking for. It's almost like at the beginning of the year I need again to turn on the light and to do some cleaning out and finding of the things I need.

As Jesus begins his ministry; it is in a way about that light being turned on again, inviting us to see what we might have been missing—things we needed, things we were tripping over.

When I'm in that dark room and all of a sudden that light turns on, it can be pretty disorienting. Sometimes it's like flying upside down, and coming out of the clouds and realizing, Uh-oh...

So what Jesus invites us to do is to reorient ourselves, to turn around, to look again to God as the one who will show us the way, as the light of our lives. He invites us to see what that light might look like in our lives. It's easy to think about that physical light, but it really is, in our lives, a metaphor, so there are a couple of stories I want to tell about the idea of going into the light.

There was one point when my daughter was a nanny. She was in Italy, in a castle, taking care of children. It was night and the children had gone to bed, and all of a sudden she hears this clanking sound in the dark castle, like metal clanking. I'm not sure what I would have done, but she went to find out what was going on. She went in and turned on the light and walked toward the noise. There were these pet turtles clanking up against the side of their tank. She found out the last nanny quit because she knew the place was haunted. Sometimes we need the light to help us see what's really going on.

There's another story, and I don't remember where I read it, but in the middle of the night during a great storm, the doctor is called to an emergency. He calls for his horses and carriage, and he's driving madly to get to the patient's house. He comes to a bridge across a stream, and his horses stop. He's beating on them, but they won't go. Suddenly he stops. He realizes that if they don't want to go across the stream, maybe there's a reason. So he gets a torch and sees the floodwater flowing across the bridge. Sometimes we need the light to see the danger before us.

The first story was about fear. We need the light to help us through our fears. Sometimes there really is danger that we need to see, and we need the light to help us see it. Sometimes it's subtler things we can learn. We think about an idea as a light coming on. So here's a third story.

Two women are walking through a grocery store. They are good friends. The woman who is telling the story is telling about her friend who is an elementary school principal and knows really well how to take care of young children and what's good for them. So as they're walking through the store, they meet a mother who is walking the opposite way. She has a young child who is trying to take things off the bottom shelves, and she is getting frustrated with him, and telling him, "Don't do that!"

In the next aisle, they meet again and this time that young mother is a little bit more vocal with her child, a little more staccato-like and a little louder. In the next aisle, she has the child by his shoulder and is beginning to shake him. The woman telling the story says her adrenaline is starting to rise and she begins to worry about what's going to happen. She sees her friend go to talk to them. She's sure her friend is going to tell the mother how important it is not to do all these things and how the best way to do it is, and get into a conflict with this young mother.

So as she walks up, she says, "You have a beautiful child. How old is he?" The mother, taken aback, says, "He's three." The woman says, "My son likes to do the same things. You must have a really curious and intelligent child who wants to see all those things." The young mother says shyly, "Yes, I think he is pretty intelligent and curious, but sometimes he just wears me out." The woman says, "Isn't that the case? It happens to all of us, doesn't it?" Then as they walked on by, the mother is holding her child, talking about how she will give him his favorite meal that night. A light goes on. It's a subtler light, isn't it? A light goes on showing us another way.

When Jesus is saying "repent," he's saying, "turn." Turn to the light. Turn to God. We need that light in our lives. The light that God gives us, the way Jesus shows us. I was thinking about how important it is when I am disoriented to be reoriented by Christ, to let that light show me what's in my life and needs to be changed, or what I need to find. The thing I know I most need to see, that I most need to find, is Jesus.

As he begins his ministry, one of the very first things he does is to go to folks and say, "Follow me." I always struggle with that a little bit because if I were one of those guys, I might want to say, "If you could just show me where to throw my net, that's what I really want. I want to be able to throw my net to the right side to catch more fish. Or can you show me how to make stronger nets, or mend these nets better?" But when

Jesus says that to those folks, he doesn't say, "I'm going to make your present life better." He says, "Follow me." It's a complete turn to God. When he asks those folks to follow him, he's saying, "Put me first." It's an invitation for us to recognize that God is first. Jesus is first. The Kingdom of God is first, and the rest of it comes from that. As we turn, as we change, we will be different because we follow Jesus. Following Jesus is not following something in our culture, in our society. It is following the one who came to us to show us the very love and grace of God. He invites us to follow him and to be different.

Viktor Frankl wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. He was in a Nazi Germany concentration camp and he began to discover this same thing—that when we open ourselves to the light, we are changed. Here's what he saw the change to be:

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves, and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our question must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

It's a question for us. I think that the answer begins ultimately by turning to God through Jesus and allowing him to show us the way. It is remembering that our loyalty is with Christ. The authority is with Christ. The way is with Christ. And what does he teach us? To love one another, to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He shows us the way of righteousness and justice.

If you read through the article by Tim Keller last week, in one place he says, "In the Bible, *tzadeqah* (righteousness) refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity."

Following Christ invites us to live into the Kingdom of Heaven, to begin living into it now. To do that is to follow him and to show God's love, righteousness, and justice. Those big words really just mean am I going to live with the people next to me in a way that is just and fair? Am I going to try to help the people around me? Am I going to just look at what's in it for me, or am I going to look with care on those who are next to me, or further away from me, but who are all God's children?

Jesus is inviting us to follow him and to be different people, different than the world around us, and enable the world to see that difference—the love of God at work. I always feel challenged at the beginning of the year to live into the light, to follow Jesus, to be different. Amen.