

## *A Word from Home: 2. The Grace of Limitations*

John 1: 6-9

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I am continuing in a series of Advent sermons on the prologue of the Gospel of John. Last week we heard that from the beginning, Jesus Christ has been God's mission to our dark and chaotic world. Now the text tells us about our mission.

The first five verses of John are among the most profound sentences of the Bible. "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

Those great verses mean that with the birth of a child named Jesus we are not abandoned to the darkness. We are no longer on our own to struggle with diseases that are sucking the life out of us, jobs that are flattening out our souls, families that are hanging together by a thread. The world is no longer on its own against the threats of violence, and racism, and despair. With the birth of the Savior the light has come. And the darkness cannot overcome the light. That is the mission of Jesus Christ.

Now we get to your mission. Immediately after introducing Christ, the very next line of the biblical drama says, "There was a man sent from God named John." It could also have said, "There was a man sent from God named Bob, or George, or Bill." "There was a woman sent from God named Sally, or Ruth," or whatever your name is. Because just as the birth of Jesus on that dark Christmas Eve was no accident but a critical part of the drama from the beginning, neither was your birth an accident. You too have been woven into the drama. Verse six. That's your verse, which proclaims there is also a great sacred mission to your life. And there is no question about what this mission is.

Your mission, like John the Baptist, is to reflect the light of Christ. That is the real purpose behind your life as a student, homemaker, employee, grandparent, and the other roles you have on earth. The reason you were placed where you are is to reflect Jesus Christ there. The only question is will you fulfill that mission? At your funeral will someone stand up and say, "She lived a great life." "Because of this man, there was a little more light in our corner of the world."

You know, in my line of work I get to a lot of funerals. And I can already tell you a little bit about yours. When we get to the eulogy, nobody is going to stand up to read your resume or your bank statement. What we are going to try to talk about is how much Christ was seen through you, because his light is the only thing we leave behind. And what do you think God will be

talking about at your funeral? Who does not want to stand on heaven's shores and hear, "Well done good and faithful servant."? We all want to hear that. You wouldn't be spending your Sunday mornings in church if you weren't interested in God's mission for your life. That is why these next four verses are so important. They caution you against two temptations that will prevent you from fulfilling your life's mission. These temptations are particularly strong at Christmas.

*The first temptation is to think that you are the light.*

After introducing John the Baptist to us, the text says, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

The chances are great that this Christmas you are worried about a particular individual. Maybe a family member who has had a hard year. Or a colleague who seems lost in the darkness of his or her own making. Or a friend who is angry, or very sick, or depressed about the holidays. You would love to make things better for this person. But it is not your mission to take responsibility for someone's happiness. You can't save anyone. Remember, that is the mission of Jesus Christ. He alone is the light of life.

There are a lot of people who are what I would call, "pathological givers." They keep giving and giving, and they keep telling you that they are giving and giving. But they have no joy in it, and neither do you. That's because they're trying to be the light. And they are not good at it. No one is. It's not our mission.

"John came as a witness," we are told. Witnesses do not make things happen. Ask any courtroom judge and they will tell you that the last thing they want is a creative witness. The witness' job is just to describe what he or she saw. Then let the light of truth shine through. But the witness is not the power person. No, the power is in the events to which the witness testifies.

In Georges Bernanos' wonderful novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*, a young priest is summoned to care for a woman who has always been a difficult parishioner. Now she is dying. The priest is filled with ambivalence about this pastoral call. Still, he goes through the motions. "Be at peace," he says routinely. To his surprise the woman kneels down before him and receives this peace. Her whole countenance changes before his eyes. The priest is overwhelmed as he watches her receive more peace than he himself has. "Oh, miracle," he says, "thus to be able to give what we ourselves do not possess, the sweet miracle of our empty hands."

There isn't a thing that you have that God needs, except maybe your empty hands into which can place the most wonderful Christmas gifts for others. Gifts like hope and peace, love and joy.

Every time I go to visit a parishioner in the hospital, I pass physicians and nurses in the hall who always have the most wonderful things in their hands. They've got those great clipboards. They've got things slung around their necks, things sticking out of their pockets, and trays filled with the most wonderful medications. They've even got uniforms that say, "I mean serious business." The pastor has none of those tools. When I was a young pastor, I wished I had some-

thing in my hands to take away people's pain. But over the years I have learned what the best doctors and nurses have always known. In fact, it was the doctors and nurses who taught me this - there is a time for using the tools you have been given, and there is a time for approaching someone with empty hands. Our empty hands say, I am here only to give you back to God. And in His hands the sweetest miracles can begin to happen.

*The other temptation this passage cautions us against, is demanding more light than we have.*

In Jesus Christ we are told, "The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." That is quite a statement. In the birth of Christ, there is enough light for everyone. Is that right? Well, help me remember this story.

A man and his young wife are far from home, trying to pay their taxes. The woman is pregnant. Very pregnant. The man desperately tries to find a place for her to give birth, but there is no room for them in the inn. They settle for a place in the stable with the animals. The woman gives birth. A cry of pain is heard. And a normal looking child is born to Mary and Joseph. "The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Really? He sure looked ordinary sitting in that manger. All parents think their baby is special, but this one was the light of the world?

Frankly the light of Christmas does not overwhelm us. What changed after Jesus was born? Herod is still in charge, and will soon give the order to massacre all the babies in Bethlehem. To this day what is different? Violence still looms in many parts of our world. Mothers still flee from tyrants with their babies. After Christmas you will still have the same life with the same burdens. The only thing that is different is that now you have this thin, new born, ray of light that the darkness cannot overcome.

Thank God for that Light. It is a grace. And thank God for the grace that do not have more, because you already have all the light you can bear. What would it have done to Mary if she knew everything that would happen to her son? What if, while she cradled her baby, she knew all about the cross? It would kill any mother to have that much light about her child. What would have happened if you knew everything that was going to happen in your life when you were a child? All the mistakes you would make. All the overwhelming responsibility you would be given. You would have never left home!

Too much light will blind those of us who have grown accustomed to living in a dark world. As the psalmist says, God's "word is a lamp unto our path, a light unto our feet." It is like those little lights along a sidewalk at night. They give just enough light for the next step.

The light of Christ gives just enough light to fulfill our mission today. Tomorrow, there will be more light when we need it. So let us not demand more light. Let us be faithful to the light we have been given. Amen.