

“ADVENT LIGHT”:

SERMON BY THALIA JOHNSON FOR DECEMBER 11, 2011. 3 ADVENT YEAR B
JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

LIGHT UP YOUR WORD, O GOD, THAT IT MAY FIND IT’S WAY TO THE DEEPEST CORE OF OUR YEARNINGS. WITH JESUS WE PRAY, AMEN.

WE ARE JUST UNDER 11 DAYS AWAY FROM THE SHORTEST DAY OF THE YEAR, 5:30 AM DECEMBER 22, ACCORDING TO COORDINATED UNIVERSAL TIME. I HAVEN’T HEARD THAT TERM BEFORE – COORDINATED UNIVERSAL TIME.

SINCE THE FALL HAS SEEMED WARMER AND BRIGHTER, THIS PARTICULAR SHORTENING OF THE DAYS HAS NOT BEEN AS CHALLENGING FOR ME AS SOME YEARS.

BUT ALWAYS IN ADVENT THERE IS SOMETHING IN THE LESSONS THAT BRINGS A RENEWED EMPHASIS ON LIGHT – HELPING TO BUILD ANTICIPATION OF LONGER DAYS, A NEW YEAR AND INCARNATION – REMEMBERING AGAIN THE BIRTH OF A CHILD THAT HAS MADE SUCH A DIFFERENCE FOR SO MANY CENTURIES.

IT HAPPENS AGAIN TODAY. THE VERY BEGINNING OF JOHN’S GOSPEL, THE PROLOGUE, IS WELL KNOWN. “IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD AND WORD WAS GOD.” IT’S A POEM WITH LITERARY APPEAL THAT HAS STOOD WELL THE TEST OF TIME.

THE FIRST THREE VERSES OF OUR GOSPEL TODAY, VERSES 6 – 8, DON’T FOLLOW THE SAME PATTERN AND BREAK UP THE POEM: “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.”

AND THEN IN VERSE 9, IT GOES BACK TO THE PATTERN OF THE POEM. “HE WAS IN THE WORLD AND THE WORLD CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM; YET THE WORLD DID NOT KNOW HIM”.

THESE 3 VERSES THAT INTRODUCE JOHN TELL US, ACCORDING TO ONE WRITER, THAT “THE STORY HAS MOVED FROM THE ETERNAL AND PRE-EXISTENT TO A SPECIFIC TIME AND PLACE.” ANOTHER WRITER SAYS IT MIGHT BE AN INSERTION PUT IN LATER.

THEN IN VERSES 19-28, BACK TO JOHN THE WITNESS, IN ANOTHER TIME AND PLACE. IT IS HIS RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES SENT FROM JERUSALEM THAT MORE FULLY EXPLAIN HIS ROLE, PAVING THE WAY FOR THE LIGHT.

AS WITH THE REFERENCES TO ISAIAH, THIS TAKES US BACK TO THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE CREATION STORIES.

PHILOSOPHERS, MATHEMATICIANS AND THEOLOGIANS HAVE CONTEMPLATED THIS FOR EONS – AND YET IT IS NOT BEYOND OUR COMMON EXPERIENCE TO ALSO BE DRAWN TO THINKING ABOUT IT WITH WONDER AND AWE.

WHAT WAS THERE BEFORE LIGHT? VOID, TOTAL DARKNESS, NOTHINGNESS. I CAN'T FIGURE OUT HOW TO KNOW ANYTHING BEFORE LIGHT. HOW DID LIGHT COME TO BE? WHO CONCEPTUALIZED THE FIRST LIGHT?

DID ANYTHING EXIST BEFORE LIGHT? IF SO, HOW WOULD IT BE KNOWN WITHOUT A MECHANISM TO PUT IT IN CONTRAST TO WHATEVER IS AROUND IT?

THIS ALL ASSUMES THE CONCEPT OF VISION, OF SEEING, BUILDING ON THAT SPECIFIC SENSE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN NOTHINGNESS AND REALITY.

THE PEOPLE OF JOHN'S TIME, ALONG WITH EVERYONE SINCE, CAN UNDERSTAND THIS EXPLANATION OF WHAT WAS TO COME, WHO WAS TO COME. THE LIGHT, FOR WHICH JOHN WAS THE WITNESS, WAS NOTHING LESS THAN THE LIGHT OF CREATION.

JOHN AS WITNESS WAS LEADING THE WAY TO THE LIGHT, HELPING US GET READY FOR THE LIGHT, MAKING PEOPLE WANT TO LOOK FOR THE LIGHT, HELPING PEOPLE FIND THE LIGHT.

THE LIGHT THAT COMES WITH EACH NEW DAY IS ONE OF THE VERY FEW ETERNAL CONSTANTS WE HAVE. I KNOW THAT, EVEN THOUGH DAYS WILL BE SHORTER FOR A FEW MONTHS, THEY WILL AGAIN GET LONGER. IN THE MIDDLE OF A DARK NIGHT I KNOW THAT THERE WILL BE MORNING; THERE WILL AGAIN BE BRIGHTNESS.

I AM NOT SPEAKING METAPHORICALLY HERE. THIS IS THE PHYSICAL REALITY THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH WHATEVER IS GOING ON IN MY LIFE OR THE LIVES OF THOSE AROUND ME OR ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD. THE CYCLE OF DAY AND NIGHT IS SO FUNDAMENTALLY REAL THAT IT INDEED HAS BECOME A METAPHOR FOR MULTIPLE EXPRESSIONS OF HOPE AND RENEWAL.

EXPLAINING THIS JESUS, THE MESSIAH NOW ON THE WAY, AS SUCH A FUNDAMENTAL REALITY AND AS IMPORTANT AS CREATION, IS INCREDIBLE.

TWO PIECES CONNECT THIS FOR ME RIGHT NOW.

MOST OF YOU KNOW I'VE HAD CORNEA TRANSPLANTS IN EACH EYE, TO DEAL WITH A GENETIC DYSTROPHY WHICH LED TO LOW VISION, AND WITHOUT WHICH I WOULD NOW BE BLIND.

THERE'S NO BLOOD SUPPLY TO THE CORNEA, SO HEALING IS VERY SLOW. THE TRANSPLANTS WERE IN 2002 AND 2004. THE FIRST ONE IS HEALING WELL AND ONLY NEEDS MINOR CORRECTION TO REACH 20/20. THE SECOND ONE IS HEALTHY, MEDICALLY, BUT ITS GOING OFF COURSE IN THE HEALING PROCESS. IT KEEPS LEANING FURTHER AND FURTHER OFF THE ANGLE NEEDED FOR PROPER REFRACTION OF LIGHT. CONSEQUENTLY, IMAGES THAT COME INTO THE EYE ARE NOT REFRACTED ONTO THE RETINA, SO I DON'T GET THE PICTURE.

THAT EYE MEASURED 20/400 THIS PAST THURSDAY. ALL I CAN SEE IS A VAGUELY DARKER BLUR FOR THE BIGGEST E ON THE EYE CHART – NO DEFINITION. THE BRAIN GETS DIZZY TRYING TO COORDINATE THAT DISCREPANCY.

IN SEPTEMBER THEY DID A TEST WHICH SOMEHOW ALLOWS THEM TO PROJECT THE EYE CHART DIRECTLY ONTO THE RETINA, BYPASSING THE CORNEA. IT WAS SO AMAZING!! I COULD SEE THE WHOLE EYECHART AND READ AT 20/40 AND SMALLER. IT WAS LIKE A HOLOGRAM. I HAD TO SIT VERY STILL AND THE LETTERS WERE ALL IN A WATERY-LIKE ENVIRONMENT, BUT THEY WERE THERE.

THAT LED TO THE DECISION TO TRY A NEW PROSTHETIC DEVICE FOR THE EYES. IT LOOKS LIKE A GIANT CONTACT LENS WITH A BUBBLE ON IT. IT IS NOT A CONTACT, AS IT DOES NOT SIT ON THE CORNEA – IT SITS ON THE WHITE PART OF THE EYE, AND THE BUBBLE IS FILLED WITH SALINE. IT ALLOWS THE ACCURATE REFRACTION GETTING THE LIGHT TO THE RETINA.

THERE ARE 5-7 ALL-DAY APPOINTMENTS INVOLVED IN THE DECISION ON WHETHER THIS WILL WORK OR NOT, FITTING AND TRAINING IN HOW TO USE THEM. WE MADE THE FINAL DECISION ON THURSDAY TO GO AHEAD.

I'VE HAD 2 DAYS NOW WITH THEM IN. I WEAR THEM FOR 3 HOURS TO SEE IF THEY WILL BE COMFORTABLE ENOUGH TO USE. SO IMAGINE GOING FROM THIS VAGUE BLOB, AND NOTHING ELSE ON THE EYE CHART, TO 20/20 VISION. CLEAR, CRISP, BRIGHT – EVERY LETTER!!! I WAS ABLE TO READ EVERY LICENSE PLATE, HOUSE NUMBER AND ROAD SIGN. I CAN READ REGULAR PRINT FOR MORE THAN A FEW MINUTES. THERE'S MORE WORK YET TO DO, AND HOPEFULLY I'LL HAVE THEM IN LESS THAN TWO WEEKS.

I HAVE HAD VERY FEW EXPERIENCES THAT HAVE SUCH A CONTRAST. I KNOW THERE IS UNDERSTANDABLE SCIENCE BEHIND IT, YET THE WORD MIRACLE IMMEDIATELY COMES TO MIND. AMAZING!

HOW NOT TO COMPARE THAT EXPERIENCE TO THE LIGHT JOHN SAYS TO ANTICIPATE? HOW TO HANG ON TO IT AND NOT LOSE IT IN THE DYNAMICS OF DAILY LIVING? HOW TO REMEMBER IT, WHEN ANOTHER DIFFICULT CHALLENGE ARISES THAT SEEMS TO HAVE NO SOLUTIONONLY DARKNESS?

ITS TIME TO LEAVE THOSE QUESTIONS ALONE FOR AWHILE, AND LIVE IN THE MOMENT OF ANTICIPATION ...THE MOMENT OF BELIEVING IN THE REALITY OF NEW LIGHT....THE MOMENT OF VERY PRESENT HOPE. IT'S A TIME TO CELEBRATE ALL WHO HAVE MADE THIS LITERAL NEW LIGHT POSSIBLE.

THAT'S A PERSONAL REALITY, AND IT LEADS TO THE SECOND PIECE ARISING FROM THIS GOSPEL.

ITS FOCUS IS ON JOHN HELPING US TO LOOK FOR THE LIGHT. ANOTHER PERSON LEADING US, OR PROVIDING THE WAY TO NEW LIGHT, NEW IDEAS, NEW HELP, NEW HOPE.

MY MOST FREQUENT EXPERIENCE OF GOD ACTIVE IN MY LIFE IS THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE. THOSE WHO HAVE INTENTIONALLY OR WITHOUT HAVING ANY IDEA THEY WERE INVOLVED, PROVIDING WHATEVER WAS MOST NEEDED, OR MOST SURPRISING, OR MOST JOYFUL, AT SOME VITAL TIME.

WHILE WE DON'T HAVE MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE IT, BY VIRTUE OF BEING ALIVE AND INTERACTING WITH OTHERS, WE ARE THE SOURCE OF THAT HELP AT TIMES. WE ARE THE PATH TO THE LIGHT FOR SOMEONE.

THIS GOSPEL IS JUST AS MUCH ABOUT OUR WILLINGNESS TO BE LIGHT FOR OTHERS, AS IT IS ABOUT FINDING THE LIGHT IN OUR OWN LIVES.

I THINK IT COMES IN MOMENTS RATHER THAN LONG PERIODS OF TIME. THE IMPORTANCE OF MOMENTS – WHEN ASKED TO THINK BACK TO THE IMPORTANT TIMES IN OUR LIVES, IT'S MOST FREQUENTLY SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS THAT COME TO MIND. THERE ARE MULTIPLE MOMENTS IN EACH DAY WHERE WE ARE EACH PROVIDING LIGHT FOR OTHERS. THIS ISN'T AN EXERCISE IN EGOTISM, IT'S ACKNOWLEDGING A REALITY THAT OFTEN GETS LOST.

I THINK THIS ALSO TIES DIRECTLY INTO OUR PURPOSE IN LIVING – INDIVIDUALLY AND AS COMMUNITIES – TO HELP BUILD THE JUBILEE YEAR, PROCLAIMED IN ISAIAH – TO SEEK AND SERVE CHRIST, THE LIGHT, IN ALL WE MEET – AND TO BELIEVE DEEPLY THAT WE ARE THE LIGHT, THE BELOVED OF GOD.

ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA!