

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 1, 2005
Mid Week Advent 1

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 24
Second Lesson: Acts 13:24-25
Gospel: John 1:6-8,19-23

A Witness to the Light

Isaiah speaks some 700 years before the Messiah would be born and tells us what the forerunner of the Messiah would be doing.

Now if you have spent any time today shoveling and you got a little bit tired out, a little cold, maybe you are huffing a little bit and you walk back into the house, what do you want to comfort you? Hot chocolate, hot coffee, hot blanket, hot soup—would you want someone to meet you at the door and say, “You forgot the back steps”?

If you look at these words of Isaiah 40, God says the forerunner is going to come to the Messiah and comfort his people. But look at the message. “*All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall*”—it’s not exactly a comforting message, is it? We are sinners, sin deserves to be punished, we deserve to stand no longer than the grass or the fields do. The Messiah’s forerunner would come and witness to the Light that was coming by preaching repentance because that repentance was needed so people would understand how desperately they need the comfort that the Messiah would bring. Because without knowledge of sin, someone could be born as true God and true man to live perfectly under the law in our place and then to die as the punishment for our sins and it would mean nothing to us, because we think we are alright on our own—“I’m not as bad as that guy over there.” The message that would comfort God’s people would first of all be the law that would bring them terror so that when the forerunner would say, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, the people would thrill to hear there is hope. God has kept his promise and God will keep his promise and pay for our sins.

That is the message that Isaiah said that the forerunner, the witness to the Light, would proclaim. We read from Isaiah 40:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Time for Silent Meditation

If the glory of the Lord appeared in front of you, how would you react?

God's glory does come to you in the Law ("all men are like grass...") and the gospel ("her sin has been paid for"). Do you always react the way you just described? Why not?

A light does not benefit a blind man. Why do we need to know that "all men are like grass" before the Great Light can be a blessing to us?

"He gathers the lambs in his arms." Think of the famous painting of Jesus carrying a lamb. Why is it comforting to know you are that lamb?

I'm a man and as I watch television I believe firmly that commercials are the time that you should work out the battery in your remote control, but every now and then there has been a series of commercials on that catch my eye and I just find them fascinating and humorous. I don't know if you've seen them—I don't remember what they are for—but in them you see Peyton Manning asking the produce guy to sign his melon. Then you see him cheering on the guy at the salad bar. Then you see him standing outside as they change shifts at the restaurant and he starts jumping up and down, getting real giddy when someone throws him their smock or whatever it was that they were wearing.

I think it is interesting simply because that is the kind of thing he faces every day—people just offering up praise and honor to him simply because he is a football player and when it is turned around, it looks kind of silly—someone being praised because they stack up melon well.

But you know how it is for us. When we start getting people's praises, usually we don't want to turn it around. We like to hear it for ourselves. Our own sinful nature likes that pat on the back and likes that adulation that comes at times from other people. That is what makes a portion of John the Baptist's ministry so fascinating. People listened to

John teach. He taught about repentance, about turning away from sin and turning to God, and baptism in the name of the One who would come and how that would have this effect for them and how it would prepare them for the kingdom of God that was right there at their hand. He taught with such authority and he spoke with such power as he spoke the Word of God that people began to wonder if he was the Messiah.

John, as a sinful human being, I would think had to be tempted to take some of that glory for himself. But a faithful witness points people away from themselves and to Christ. You and I have the privilege of sharing Christ with others and people may think of us as their spiritual parents because we are the one that shared the Word of God with them and maybe the Lord worked through us to bring them to faith. They may want to thank us profusely, but like John we want to point them not to ourselves but to the One who came and lived in their place and died in their place and took away their sins.

As we consider our Second Reading, we hear John preaching repentance, but we hear him also in humility pointing away from himself and to the Light. We read Acts 13: 24-25:

Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: "Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

Time for Silent Meditation

Repentance includes sorrow over sin, trusting in Christ for forgiveness, and turning away from sin to living for Jesus. Which of these parts do you struggle with most often?

How does your answer change to this question with your different sins?

How does knowing the Great Light of God's love help you in this daily struggle?

Have you ever run into someone at the store and talked with them awhile and then afterwards turn to the person you were with and say, "Who was that"? Or did you ever talk to someone for quite awhile and then all of a sudden it dawns on you that they think you are someone else?—maybe your brother or sister or someone's sibling? Maybe they have mistaken you for somebody else. It is kind of interesting when that happens. Those things happen from time to time to us.

Sometimes people might say that we remind them of someone else. Someone might say that when they hear us saying something, "You sound just like so and so". I was once working at a county fair booth for one of our WELS county fair booths a long time ago and my father was there. He was turned the other way and after they guy I was talking with left, he said, "You know what, I thought it was my brother, Dale. You sounded just like your Uncle Dale as you talked with that guy." He said it was scary to him because I sounded so similar to him.

In our Gospel from John 1, John the Baptist reflected the Light that he was preparing people for so well that people mistook him for that Light. They thought he might be the Messiah. Again he points people away from himself and to the Messiah. But it speaks volumes about living our faith—living in the confidence that Christ has taken away our sins, living in the confidence that we are forgiven sinners, living in the confidence that God will be with us always. As we live with that confidence, as we live in that truth that God has taken away our sins through the Light of Jesus Christ, we also will reflect the Light. As we do it, as we let our light shine, then perhaps people will ask us so that we can share Christ with them and they might glorify our Father in heaven as Jesus himself said in Matthew 5.

For our final reading, we read from John 1:

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Time for Silent Meditation

John reflected God's Light so well that people wondered if he could be the Messiah.
How well do you reflect the Great Light in your life?

How can you improve your reflection of the Great Light?

John came "so that through him all men might believe." God has also made you a witness to the Light. Does it scare you or thrill you to know God can use you to give people the gift of salvation?

Rejoice in knowing that the Holy Spirit has made a straight path to the Great Light for you!