

*A sermon preached on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 -- the third Sunday in Advent – entitled, “The Importance of Confronting our Limitations.”*

he Gospel writer John begins by telling us about light that sustains creation, and about a man named John who came to bore witness to the light. The light John talks about is more than simply physical light – he is talking about the light – the goodness that sustains all creation.

As such he mirrors the very first chapter, of the Bible – indeed the very first day of creation in which “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day,’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.”

First there was darkness, and then God created light and declared the light good. But God doesn’t call the darkness – the nighttime -- bad. In fact, in some sense the light would be meaningless without darkness as a contrast.

God’s creation has a rhythm to it: there is night time and there is day time, a rhythm reflected in the commandment to keep the Sabbath day of rest. There is the time for work and there is the time for rest.

Advent comes in the season of the year when the darkness is greater – the literal physical darkness as we approach the winter solstice. The nights are very long, the days are very short. In the natural world it is the season of hibernation. All living beings wait for the light to return.

For the vast majority of human history, there was a basic acceptance of the fact that the absence of light at night meant that there were limitations regarding what human beings could accomplish – the acceptance of the fact that we don’t always get what we want.

Once the sun had set, work largely stopped, and with shorter days less work was accomplished. That’s just the way it was.

And then human beings learned how to harness the power of electricity, and Thomas Edison invented the first electric light bulb. And technology began to advance at warp speed.

Much good has come out of the advancements in technology. On many fronts, it has led to the reduction a human suffering and the enhancement of life. In this sense the advancement of technology has been an expression of the original Biblical affirmation about we human beings that also comes from the story of creation that we are made in the image and likeness of God. When human beings create technology that enhances life, we reflect the creative nature of God.

Of course, there have been ways in which the advancements of technology have not been so good. The obvious ways include the ever-increasing sophistication in weapons of war.

But that’s not the negative consequence of technology’s advancement that I’m thinking about this morning. I’m thinking about the ways in which technology has led us to lose touch with the

rhythm God knit into creation between light and darkness, rest and work. There is that which we are capable of accomplishing, and there is that which we are incapable of accomplishing.

The advancement of technology has led us to deny our limitations. The sun sets – darkness descends. No problem, turn a switch and we can continue to work, continue to strive to manipulate our environment to get what we want.

Although the original creation story doesn't say that nighttime is bad, throughout human history light and darkness has seen as metaphors for goodness and evil.

In this sense, we human beings are a mixture of light and darkness. We are made in the image and likeness of God – there is something fundamentally good about us. But we are children of Adam and Eve which means there are destructive capacities in all of us. We are, to use a Biblical word, sinners.

And one theme of that ancient story of Adam and Eve is the refusal of humans to accept limitations. God says they are not to eat the fruit of a certain tree, the original humans say, “oh yeah?” They overreach.

The particular Advent we find ourselves in occurs not only in the natural season of darkness, it is occurring also in the metaphorical darkness of this horrible Pandemic.

One of the things that the Pandemic has done is force us in various ways to confront our limitations. We can't fix this. We can't do so many of the things we are accustomed to doing.

It has also been the occasion for the revealing of the light and darkness that is within us.

There is the light of courage and kindness and solidarity that we see expressed – a light to be celebrated – often as small as a single candle in a dark basement.

But the pandemic has also revealed our darkness:

The ways in which, for instance, anxiety and fear can take hold of us – leaving us paralyzed – unable to get out of the prison cells of our egos in order to express love.

The ways we find ourselves losing patience, being irritable or worse – sometimes with the people to whom we are most intimately tied.

Our inability, perhaps to be disciplined – to establish order and routine to our lives in the new normal – the ways we so easily find ourselves descending into chaos.

Our inability at times, to stay positive, to see hope. Our profound capacity for despair.

The pandemic has revealed our limitations, our frailty and our brokenness, our emptiness of spirit. Stuff we don't like to confront which leads us to turn to our addictions to distract us from

facing our inner darkness – Netflix, perhaps – or my personal favorite, an addiction to work – the stubborn refusal to honor the rhythm of work and rest.

But perhaps there is value in confronting our inner darkness, and the humbling it brings. Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus said, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In the midst of all that we are dealing with in the midst of the pandemic, I hear guidance for what we are experiencing in our Gospel reading.

The Gospel writer John focuses our attention on the one we know as John the Baptist, but in this Gospel John is not so much about baptizing as he is about bearing witness.

Specifically, bearing witness to the light that is coming into the world. To bear witness to Jesus.

The thing that caught my attention is how consistently John acknowledges his own limitations. “Are you the messiah come to save us?” the people ask. “Nope.” Are you a prophet? “Nope.”

I don’t know about you but sometimes I suffer from something of a messiah complex, which is to say, I live at times like I feel like I should be able to fix everything, including myself.

But I’m not the messiah.

When pressed the only thing John will say about himself is, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Notice that John appears in the wilderness – throughout the Bible a setting for encounters with God. Out in the wilderness with no house, no shelter, no electricity – it is clear we human beings aren’t in charge. It is a place where we are compelled to face our limitations.

John declares that he is not the Lord -- his role is simply to alert us to the coming of the Lord in order that we may prepare.

And perhaps a significant piece of that preparation is the humble acknowledgement of our limitations. The fact that we can’t save ourselves. We need a savior. We need the grace and mercy the savior brings.

I want to finish with a story a woman told me 35 years ago in one of my first churches. She was a single mother of a highly active little boy. It was early evening and she was preparing dinner for them. Typically, with her son present the woman’s attention would be to some extent held by him. But uncharacteristically, this evening the little boy lay down on the couch and took a nap.

The woman found the silence in her apartment strangely distressing. She went to turn on the TV, to fill the silence, to occupy her attention but she heard a small voice inside her say, “Don’t turn on the TV.” She obeyed the small voice, but shortly afterwards in another attempt to distract

herself she felt the urge to turn on the radio. But again, the little voice said, “Don’t turn on the radio.”

She sat down in this distressing silence of her home, facing her own inner emptiness – the inner darkness she was so intent on avoiding. And gradually her experience shifted. A peace descended. She described having this sense that her home was being enveloped by a golden radiance.

The pandemic has forced us into the wilderness – inviting us to confront our limitations -- to acknowledge that we can’t save ourselves, that we aren’t the light, that we need God’s light.

The light is coming. This light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. We are not the light.

With Advent there is the promise that the light is coming – the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot overcome this light. Be not afraid. God will do that which we cannot do for ourselves.