

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
Genesis 1: 1-5 and John 1: 1-9
“First Light”
1st Sunday of Advent – Year C
November 29, 2015**

During this year’s Advent season we will consider various texts that speak of light. As the days grow shorter and the amount of light in the day lessens, we, as children of light, are invited to consider the images of light that we find in scripture and what it means for us to receive that light anew, live in that light, and shine that light in the world around us. We begin with two versions of the story of creation, first from Genesis 1 and second from the Gospel of John.

READ GENESIS 1:1-5 AND JOHN 1:1-9

Have you ever been in a very dark place?

If you have ever toured a place like Linville Caverns, or have been caving, or have been in a securely sealed room with no light, then perhaps you can begin to understand what it might be like to be in the dark? On the cavern tour you are able to follow lights along the path until the point when they inform you that they are about to turn off all the lights. And when those lights are extinguished in that cold, damp place below the earth, it is a slightly eerie feeling. It is also fascinating to literally not be able to see your hand in front of your face...but only for a little while. Then it starts to get a little creepy. For we are all dependent on the light and the absence of it for any extended period of time begins to make us feel uncomfortable.

Scientists tell us that visible light is a form of energy that exists as a part of the electromagnetic spectrum. The known parts of this spectrum range from longer radio waves to shorter gamma waves. The wavelengths that the human eye is able to see are known as visible light – they are only a small part of the whole spectrum. Scientists agree that without the electromagnetic spectrum – without light – life as we know it would not be able to exist. So, when we talk about light, we are speaking of something much greater than what we can see. In the same way, when we read the words, “And God said, let there be light,” we are considering something much greater than God simply turning on the light.

Biblical scholars do not agree over the origin of the Genesis story. It is easy to document the many ancient texts from ancient cultures that tell similar creation stories. In some ways, it is hard to argue that the story in Genesis 1 is unique. What is unique, however, are the theological claims that are made in the story. For in it we find the claims that God existed before all time and that God is the one who speaks and breathes all life into existence. Furthermore, we find that God is the one who assigns value to that creation and calls that created order into a harmonious existence. Out of the dark, formless void of chaos God speaks life - an ordered creation that is called good.

Some suggest that the writing of this account of creation took place while Israel was in exile in Babylon. That would have been an important place to remember that God created and ordered life from the dark and formless void of chaos. That would have been an important time for God’s people to remember that God spoke life into existence and called it good. It would have been important for Israel

to remember that God has the power to shine light into the most desperate of situations and bring about God's purpose and plan for creation.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John takes the familiar creation story and interprets it in light of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Everything was brought into existence through Christ - the eternal Word of God - and that "life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4b,5) In the Genesis account, the darkness simply becomes a part of the created order. It is called night. By the time the New Testament rolls around, darkness has come to symbolize that which is opposed to God's rule. Barbara Brown Taylor and others have recently reminded us of the wonderful things that we can learn about God and about ourselves in the dark. We do not demonize the dark and the night for they are part of the created order. At the same time we recognize the primary place of light in the biblical narrative. The Light of God is the foundation for all life and it is there for all.

Advent as a season, is that time of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ. As we read the familiar texts of scripture from the prophets and the gospels we journey again with those who prepared for and witnessed the birth of the Christ child in the manger. We also are called to wake up and to pay attention to the signs of the times which invite us to be prepared for the second coming of Christ. The scriptures declare that this will happen when we least expect it - like a thief in the night. And while this may fill some with dread, we are not to fear his Advent. As people of faith we wait expectantly and with hope at the coming of the Lord and the fulfillment of all God's promises. The story of creation, read in this Advent season then, becomes a word of hope for us.

Richard Boyce, Dean at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte says it well when he writes that "the creation story is a way of holding onto hope when all signs of order in our lives have been destroyed and we must look out for signs of the creative work of God beyond our control."ⁱ

We don't have to go far at all to find chaos in our world. It would be a long, depressing list for me to read examples. Suffice it to say that we understand chaos. It can seem far away at times, but it often hits really close to home. The creation story reminds us that God is the one who brings order in the midst of chaos. God is the one who creates life, redeems life, and sustains life so that we might be in relationship with the creator and with the rest of creation. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves and we can trust that God will bring us through the chaos.

My mom and dad have been going through some things trying to clean out some rooms in their house. My mom discovered some things that belonged to my grandfather. During his service in World War II he received a devotional book from his pastor that had been published by the Presbyterian Church specifically for service men and women. Many of the devotions had to do with having hope in difficult times. I tried to imagine my grandfather on patrol as part of the 87th Infantry Division. What challenges and fears did he face day in and day out? What kind of chaos did he face? How did his faith provide light and hope to him as he journeyed through inhospitable lands and risked his life?

One devotion in particular caught my attention.

"Today many of us have been called away from the ordinary pursuits of life to serve our nation in a time of unusual crisis. We need to have some convictions upon which we can stand while civilization seems to be falling all around us...The greatest need of the hour is a strong, powerful faith in God. He still lives. There are no bombs that can blast God out of existence. There is no dictator that can force Him from His throne. There is no earthly power that can destroy Him...God's promises are always the same so instead of losing faith, and yielding to doubt and despair, now is the time to reaffirm our beliefs and our

faith. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Let us put our confidence in Him, knowing that He will never forsake us in our hour of need.”ⁱⁱ (2nd month, 9th day)

The light of creation – the first light – the life that is the light of all people is always present, always shining, always guiding, always giving, always sustaining. It is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

In Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom he wrote about the importance of light in his own life. “I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Mandela’s faith was tested but somehow he was able to feed faith and hope rather than fear and despair. Not everyone is blessed with such an optimistic attitude. There are many who find themselves in dark and difficult places and they struggle to rise above the chaos and darkness of their own lives. They need the encouragement of others to help them see the light that is within them and the light that is shining all around them.

The darkness can feel overwhelming for people like...

Jessica – a teenager who has been bullied by her peers to the point of hopelessness. She cannot see a way out. She feels alone and lost. She feels like she is in a hole and all she can think about is how to make the pain end.

Or Richard – a middle aged man who cannot find work and has lost his sense of self. He cannot pull himself out of bed in the morning. He is so tired of rejection and he doesn’t think he can make it through one more interview hearing the words, “you aren’t the right one.”

Or Laura – a woman who has been diagnosed with incurable cancer. She fears what tomorrow may bring for her and her family. She worries about her children growing up without a mother and she worries about her husband carrying the load by himself. She is burdened by the thought of using all of the family’s resources to try and find a cure.

Or Jose – a political prisoner who has been held in a dark prison cell for years without trial for a crime that he did not commit. He sits alone with very little light and very little food or water and wonders if he has been forgotten by his country or by his friends.

I recently received a mailing from the organization Amnesty International. This organization works to help fight injustice and promote human rights throughout the world. You may have seen their logo – a single candle surrounded by barbed wire. The barbed wire represents the oppression that is found in the world and the candle represents hope. It is based on the Chinese proverb – “Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.”

Sometimes we can light a candle to bring hope. It reminds us of the First Light that began the story of creation. It reminds us that we are all created by the one God who brought order from chaos and calls us all into a covenant relationship - inviting us to walk and dance and live in the light of God.

John Philip Newell, Scottish poet, pastor, and peacemaker is known for his work in Celtic Spirituality. He speaks about the First Light of creation as being the sacred light of God – a light that is found deep within every part of creation. He goes on to say that our job as partners in creation and members of the family of faith is not to create light but rather to find ways of releasing that light.^{iv} I think one way that we release it is by allowing the light that is within us to shine for the benefit of those who are in dark places. We can shine a literal candle or we can smile or we can share love in some tangible way through the giving of ourselves. It is when we turn inward that we forget the purpose of the light – which is to give life and hope. Turning outward for the sake of others not only allows our light to shine but it gives others permission to do the same. Newell also reminds us that because the First Light of creation is already in the world we can look into those places of chaos and darkness and uncover the light that is already there. We look with hope and point to those things which are happening that give evidence of God’s light. We can remind one another of the First Light of creation that gives life and light to all.

Lib reminded us last week that today is the beginning of a new liturgical year. So Happy New Year!! What we often do when a new year begins is to evaluate what we have learned from the past year and look ahead to who we are and what our priorities will be as we move forward. As we begin a new liturgical year – entering the holy days of the Advent season, we have an opportunity to remember that we are created in the Light of God and called to live in that light each and every day. We are called into a relationship with the Lord of all creation and called to shine the light of Christ into all those places where hope may be needed the most.

Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, has come to give life – and that life is the light of all people. So let us do what we can to recognize the light in others and release that light into the world. May the First Light of Creation shine in all of us and guide us faithfully into this new year.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Boyce, Richard. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1. WJK. P. 221, 223

ⁱⁱ Chaplain James Salango, U.S. Army. Facing Life With God: A Spiritual Guide for Service Men and Women (Defense Service Council of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. Richmond, VA) 1943. Second month, ninth day.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk to Freedom.

^{iv} <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/god-light>