

I spent nearly nine years ministering in my hometown. The consequence of which was that my family was often in worship when I would preach. Colleagues would ask me about how one preaches with one's parents and siblings in the pew, and the simple truth is that one ignores them. Not unkindly, but deliberately.

The occupational hazard that accompanies that is that when one's parents worship in one's congregation, there is a temptation for them to feel compelled to tell childhood stories. When I moved back to Charlotte from Indiana, I was only 26 years old and I wanted desperately to be taken seriously as a minister and having one's mother tell childhood stories which rarely do anything to indicate the maturity of the minister in question is a tough obstacle. And so I cajoled my mom to keep mum. She complied. Then I realized my dad could be the bigger liability. In his case, I resorted to threats. "I have stories too," I hinted broadly, "And I have a pulpit."

We reached détente.

But when one's siblings begin to worship in one's congregation, there is no détente.

Your siblings can *always* be counted upon to tell you *exactly* what they are thinking, in no uncertain terms. The last time I preached on this text in this season, my brother felt compelled to opine about the sermon.

"You know I'm your biggest fan," he began. In my experience, nothing good has ever followed such a line. "And I think that your sermons are brilliant. (thanks for the shout out.) But that last sermon... don't ever preach that again. In fact, don't ever preach on that text again."

Well, I happen to think that this text does have a great deal to say to us, a great deal of hope to share, and so I'd like to take another crack at it.

It's no secret that it's a tough one to understand. Scholars have a field day with it.

Indeed, in his brilliant scholarly work, *The Gospel of John*, the late New Testament theologian Raymond Brown began his commentary on the prologue with a thirteen page footnote expounding on of all things, what the definition of was was. There's just not much more you can say after that!

I think we are all familiar enough with the words. I can recall from childhood hearing the prologue to John's account of the gospel read in King James English, of course, during Saturday morning cartoons as some intrepid entrepreneur attempted to sell by this special TV offer the Bible on tape. The words sounded difficult to understand then, and I would guess, for many of us, sound difficult to understand now.

They can be enigmatic. One of the earliest heresies of the church arose out of a disputatious translation of this very passage.

The early bishops Arius and Athanasius went at it hammer and tongs over this text and what it means. There was a bitter dispute, people died over it and ultimately the line in the Nicene Creed that we hold as a confession was written "God of God, very God of very God."

In fact, it was in wrestling with the Word made flesh that I encountered my first theological nemesis, Anselm of Canterbury. I call him my nemesis because I could barely understand him then and I can barely understand him now. Anselm wrote a treatise entitled *On the Incarnation*, also entitled *Why God Became Man*. In it, he attempted by way of reason and rationality to explain the incarnation. He attempted to explain why it

was necessary, and why it was efficacious for our salvation. Indeed, I would argue that some of the theological tensions that threaten to yield the devolution of our denomination into component parts are based upon how the various parties understand the very questions Anselm sought to answer, questions about who God is and how God saves us. I would suggest, by the way that Anselm was seeking to answer a different question than the text of John's prologue sought to answer. Simply put: wrong question in equals wrong answer out.

And so with the acknowledgement that wise and weighty scholars and church fathers have struggled with this text, I want us to take a second look at the prologue to John. We won't answer the various heresies that come out of debating the Trinity, and we won't explain the incarnation because it is a mystery that deserves its own day. I do want us though, to look at the theological concepts of *darkness* and *light*.

I want us to look at the concepts of Darkness and Light because I think they are the right questions to be asking. John points us toward a consideration of darkness and light from his first words, "in the beginning." Right from the start, John wants us to be thinking of the story of Jesus alongside the story of creation. In the midst of the murkiness of John's words, he wants us to look to the murkiness of creation. The first verses of Genesis translate almost like this: at the start of it all the spirit of God was hovering around in the darkness. And out of the darkness God called into being light. And there is for us a word and a comfort in knowing that God is present in the darkness. John adds, that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And John reminds us that as the Word was with God and was God, then creation was through the Word. Not one thing came into being without him.

John points us toward the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, God's self-disclosure. He does so with his words about John the Baptist, telling us that he was not the light but that he came to testify to the light.

It's very visual language, isn't it? Before we hear word one about the incarnation, we come face to face with light and darkness.

Indeed, Charlie Cousar writes about this text: "Jesus claims in a specific way to be the light of the world, without whom people grope in the darkness. The coming of the light entails judgment, because it discloses that people prefer darkness to light. What seems to be implied in the prologue is that all people, whether they believe it or not, live in a world illuminated by the light just as they live in a world created by the Word. What they are called to do is to trust the light, to walk in it, and thereby become children of light."

Terms like light and glory and even darkness tend toward abstraction, and so do the other two other words contained in the prologue: grace and truth,

They're beautiful words, but what do they mean to us?

Words like light and darkness and glory are easy to throw around and hard to understand. Now, I don't want to seem overly simplistic, but the very idea of salvation is grounded in a reality that there is a darkness that we all struggle to escape, sometimes mightily and sometimes haphazardly and that darkness is sin. We can call it brokenness if that is somehow easier to understand, we can call it evil if that term captures for us the essence of darkness. Sometimes an image of separation tells us what it means to be walking in darkness, to borrow a phrase from Isaiah. No matter what terms we use to describe it, we know what darkness is. We all know it when we see it.

But I don't have to tell you that, do I?

I don't think it's accidental that the Bible often uses the imagery of darkness to describe what is frightening. Whether it is the psalmist talking about the darkness being as light to God, or the gospel writers talking about an outer darkness where God is not, or if it is the prophet speaking to the people in a land of deep darkness, I think the Bible's understanding of darkness is that it is where we are frightened. Darkness is where we are in pain. Darkness is where we are alone.

One of my favorite novels is Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*. In it the central characters are two couples- one of whom has been blessed with a marriage that is a true partnership, a union of equals where each has leaned upon the other for strength, and even in the very breaking of one of their bodies, has been able to provide strength for the other. The other couple is one that has had little hardship, has been blessed with considerable wealth and has to all observers had a wonderful marriage. The story tells of how these couples life journeys have intermingled, and what we learn through the course of it is that the couple who has had all the advantages has not ultimately had the best life, and even more tellingly, the best death. As the wife of the successful couple is dying, she chooses despite her husband's wish to be with her, to shut him out. She will not allow him to witness her weakness, and what we find is that in her controlling, she has never allowed him to fully be her husband. He has always been a peripheral character and always been sidelined. It has always only been about her. Stegner writes "She is also capable of a noble generosity, and of cramming down on the head of its recipient like a crown of thorns. She wept, Sally said, on the way to the hospital. Was she already thinking ahead for him, breaking him away from her by an act of cruelty and preparing him for healing?"

The poignancy of this particular character, the reason that I remember her so well is the sadness of her life: even as she lived alone, she died alone. She was unable to allow another to keep watch in the darkness.

But then, we don't have to look to fiction to see that the darkness is real. And I don't have to tell the stories to illustrate it. I don't have to tell you about my own moments in the darkness and I don't have to recap yours. You know what I'm talking about.

Because the darkness John refers to is a darkness that does not discriminate. It's a darkness that does not know boundaries and can descend in a moment, or can creep in like fog in the night. It is the darkness of Sin, and it has striven with the light to overcome it, to extinguish it, to break it and nail it to a cross. Yes, we know the darkness. And the good news of the Gospel is that light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

The darkness did not overcome the light.

The darkness did not overcome the light. A crucifixion and a stone-cold body laid in a tomb and the darkness did not overcome the light.

That's our word this morning. The light shines in the darkness. Not the light shone in the darkness and it overcame it and so we remember that once upon a time the light was there. Not "the light is coming, and even if we're scared and lonely, even though we are dead to life and unable to see into the future it's coming and so feel better, now won't you."

No. The light *shines* in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The light shines now. The light has always shone- even from creation- and the light will always shine- even to the end of the age.

What is the light? John tells us. It is the Word of God- the Word made flesh and dwelt among us.

That's why we don't worship a dead idol. We worship a living God- because the light still shines in the darkness. That's really the point of it all, isn't it? However elegantly the Gospel writer may phrase it, that's really what we hold onto.

And it is that very living Word that is our light and salvation, as John's Gospel tells us this morning.

There have surely been moments when it must have seemed that the light was all but extinguished. There have surely been winds that have blown that would make it seem as though the flame must go out. But the good news of the Gospel is that despite the darkness and the flickering, the light has not been extinguished. The darkness has not overcome it.

When we live our lives marked by the liturgical seasons of the church – the festivals such as Christmas and Easter, and even Epiphany and Pentecost, the seasons dictate the texts that we use to find comfort and joy as well as meaning in our lives, and so it is that we have spent the past weeks thinking about the birth of the Messiah. But during this time of the year when the nights are long and are only just beginning to shorten just a bit, we know that there are many for whom the night seems to go on and on. For many there is darkness that perhaps we wonder if it might ever be overcome. And so it is that we may remember that to stand up to darkness and death one must inevitably talk about birth and resurrection, because the Bible ultimately is not concerned with death and darkness.

At times, because we take sin seriously, it may seem that spend a very great deal of time thinking about it and talking about it. But in the end, we must always remember that Sin

is a broken power because of the power of God. And because of that, the Bible indeed our faith, is concerned with life and with living it, because that is what God has willed for us.

It may seem at times that the darkness goes on and on. Indeed, I will never forget sitting in the semi-darkness of our six o'clock service at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis listening to my old boss Bill Enright talk about attending the death of his friend. The friend, Bob, had Lou Gehrig's disease and had finally come to the end of his endurance. And so Bill and his wife and the family gathered around the bed, and the sedative was administered, and the ventilator removed. And peacefully, Bob died. What I won't forget is the next Sunday Bill stood up and told the congregation about Bob's death, and then he preached the simple good news of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ is risen.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way: In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream.

The darkness did not overcome it. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.