

# **Jeff's Jottings**

## *To testify to the light*

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Advent, perhaps more than any other time of the church year, invites the voice of the prophet into our lives. As the world — and we right along with it — rushes headlong into Christmas, Advent reminds us to pause, to reflect.

This week, it is the voice of John the Baptist, speaking truth to power and calling all to repentance. But with a promise, too, the promise of light, that enlightens everyone, coming into the world. John was not himself the light, but a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe.

Might I tell you of two witnesses to the light I saw this week, beacons of hope in the darkness of these difficult times.

Last Sunday, I joined the congregation at First Presbyterian in Belle Plaine for dinner and worship. Yes, dinner — they now hold worship on Sunday evening, in part as an intentional invitation to those in their community who cannot or will not attend a traditional Sunday morning service. Dinner for all preceded worship.

For years, this small-membership congregation has participated in Operation Christmas Child. This year, they completed 500 boxes. But there were leftovers from this effort, too many of this thing or another, or items collected that were too big for the OCC boxes. Save for next year? No. They set up shop, a store, in which parents and grandparents could shop for children. The store was advertised at the Belle Plaine and Le Sueur food shelves (another place the Belle Plaine church is active). It opened on a Wednesday evening and Saturday morning, matching the Belle Plaine food shelf hours, as well as Friday afternoon for three hours, with backpacks, bags, notebooks, pens,

pencils, socks, hats, gloves, underwear, slippers, boots, games, puzzles, and lots of toys. The cost? Free. Parents of 56 children could buy gifts with dignity at a store they could afford. And what was still left was donated and delivered to a senior housing complex in Le Sueur; to the Le Sueur food shelf; and to the Le Sueur Elementary School to be used as prizes during activities and games and parties before the holiday break. Light.

Meanwhile, up on the north side of Minneapolis, Liberty Community Church keeps opening its doors three nights a week during the school year, from 2:30 – 7:30, “to provide a safe place for children K-12” in that rough-and-tumble neighborhood, as a way to foster academics, arts, and activism. Does it make a difference? When assessed for math skills year-to-year, more than 80 percent of their young scholars showed “significant improvement” in their math testing scores. And more than half reported feeling “calm and at peace; loved, refreshed, improved.” That’s pretty remarkable in an environment where the achievement gap for African-American children is the worst in the nation. Light.

It is not difficult in these days to find evidence of this world’s darkness. Open the newspaper, turn on the television, read social media. We are polarized in significant ways. The work for justice and truth can seem overwhelming at times, a losing cause. But the light shines in the darkness, John writes, the true light, which enlightens everyone, and the darkness will not overcome it. These two congregations — simple illustrations for me this week of the kind of ministry happening at so many, many of our churches — remind us of John’s message: that we too are called to testify to the Light.

It’s an Advent message that can shine all year.

(P.S. Yes, absolutely, write me with how your congregation is testifying to the light this Advent. Enlighten me @ [ep@ptcaweb.org](mailto:ep@ptcaweb.org). Thank you.)