

Like most children, I sometimes got into trouble. I know - hard to believe - right? Sometimes I got into trouble for things I did and for things left undone. And one time I even got into trouble for something I didn't do! My sister saw a commercial about toilet paper and she wanted to see if it really did bounce. So she threw toilet paper out of the bathroom window. For some reason my mother thought I had done this and punished me. Well, regardless of what put me into time out, one thing was absolutely consistent. I always, always, ran out of my bedroom, when I was finally allowed out, and ran straight into my mother's arms. It seems that I could deal with most things but not with being unreconciled with my mother's love. I just had to tell her that I loved her and, more importantly, needed to hear that she loved me. That despite my faults, my failings, my imperfections, she still loved me. And being the best mom in the world, of course, she told me back.

The promise of a love even stronger than a mother's love, is what our Gospel story is about. You may wonder why this close to Christmas we are talking about John the Baptizer. And you might have noticed that in this passage, John is not called the Baptizer. No, instead he is identified as a witness. His whole identity in this passage is as a witness to Jesus. Verse 7 says, "He came as a witness to testify to the light." Being a witness to Jesus is John's entire reason for being in this Scripture. To reinforce the point verse 8 doubles down saying, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." These verses are found in the beginning of John's Gospel, or what is called the Prologue. Here the Evangelist is setting up Jesus' ministry. He uses John the Baptizer or shall we call him, John the Witness, to help identify Jesus. And who is this Jesus? He is the light, the one whom "all might believe through him." Meaning Jesus is God's self-revelation. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus is God's love sent from heaven to show us who God is. Which is love.

This Advent we have been talking about Hope. The first Sunday we talked about Hope, last week Deacon Becky preached on the One and today I want to talk about Promise. Next week I'll share some thoughts on Expectation, finalizing our season of H-O-P-E, hope.

So let's talk about promise and the power that it has. When I was in my room, bemoaning my fate, feeling angry, sad, lost, I held out for the promise of my mother's love. Her love was powerful enough to wash away all my doubts, insecurities, and fears. Knowing that I could reach out for that love, that her love would always be there, was my hope in the midst of my darkness. Likewise, the witness of John to the light is full of promise. Because it contains the seeds of faith. He came to witness so that all might believe. That we might believe in that power of God's love. We read this passage in Advent as we await the coming of our Lord. It emphasizes the role of our Savior in our lives. The light that is coming will shine through any darkness. The light that is coming will scatter the darkness from before our paths. This promise of God's love is what gives us hope.

Yes, life looks a bit dark now. Folks are struggling for so many reasons. Unemployment is high, Covid's fear is reaching its long tentacles into all of our lives, people are depressed, worn out, frustrated, tired, and many are at the end of their rope. Yet for us, we hold out hope. The darkness will burst into light. The light of the world is coming.

As the days of the calendar get shorter and shorter, and the light around us begins to fade; it is very tempting to allow our own fears of the darkness to overwhelm us. We give into the darkness when we focus on just what we are losing in this period of plague and disease.

Remember the witness of John is not just *about* Jesus, it is also itself a promise of the *success* of Jesus' work in the world. Remember the promise - that all might believe through him. John is telling of the spread of the Gospel, the scope of the Gospel, and yes, the ultimate victory of the Gospel. Over our petty sins and wickednesses. Over our jealousies and hates. Over the darkness that seems to be growing daily.

Imagine how dark it was for Mary and Joseph. All alone, miles from family and friends. No midwife to help with the birth. Mary, a very young girl herself. No room at the inn. Poor conditions to spend the night, let alone give birth to your precious baby. How depressed, afraid, they must have been. Yet, do you picture them that way? Or do you imagine them with serene looks, joyful eyes, a sense of peace, filled with wonder. Hmm... do you think it was because they knew that Jesus was coming and they were filled with hope?

May this Advent season, and all the seasons of our lives, be filled with the promise of God's love. May you be filled with hope. Amen.