



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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## TESTIMONIES TO THE LIGHT

*the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis*

*January 3, 2021*

*Lead Minister*

**Text: John 1:1–18**

Since it is the first Sunday of the New Year and the first Sunday on which I address you as Lead Minister, it is fitting that I testify briefly to my intentions as I assume the duties of this new call. And just as I had settled on describing this moment using the familiar words of the faith, like service, discipleship, and faithfulness, the evangelist of the Gospel of John sets a more appropriate mood for both this occasion and the season and thus leads me to testify to you that, in all the work we shall do together, I come to you as our Gospel text describes the prophet John . . . as a witness to testify to the light so that all may come to know what it means to have life and that more abundantly. I am not a savior. I will not be able to solve all problems and challenges we face to every member's satisfaction. There will be times when we will disagree with and disappoint one another. However, I promise you that I will be diligent in recognizing and pointing, not to myself, but to the light, to what the Gospel writer testifies is the way, the truth, and the life. And, if we all accept the duty to witness to life and light, I have no doubt that we will experience the grace upon grace, the extravagant abundance that comes from the fullness of God.

That indeed is the power of this prologue to the Gospel of John. It is a hymnic declaration that God has spoken and the result is creation, newness, life. In the beginning was the Word. Life came into being through the Word God spoke into existence. As long as God keeps speaking, there is always beginning, always creation, always life. There is no need for this writer to tell a story about a birth in a manger or even read the portents of stars. If there is a quibble with Christmas as the birthday of Jesus or if there remains a debate about the when and the where of the birth of the historical Jesus; if there is a cultural preoccupation about when to take down the tree or how long it's appropriate to say "Happy New Year," this prologue invites us to move beyond Christmas Day as just a day or an event that, once celebrated, we can leave in the past and get back to normal. For, according to the Gospel, what we celebrated on Christmas day was God's divine and eternal gift of life . . . a life . . . the life . . . Life. That should be music to our ears.

Over the last nine months, we have seen the death and shadow that a deadly global pandemic, political polarization, social unrest and uprising, and a faltering economy have wrought. Before all these things and long after they are resolved, the divine and eternal gift God has given is life, a life, the life, Life. As revealed in Jesus, it is God disclosing God's self in life . . . called, holy, embodied, grace-filled life, that divine presence with and among us, lighting our way and enlightening our world. The prophet John recognized it and came to testify to it. I recently heard a clergy person admit her confusion and discomfort with the character the other Gospels call John the Baptist. There is something about that strange prophet that potentially distracts from what he is called to do. Not so in this Gospel. This John is a witness, true to the call upon all those who hear God's speaking life: he witnesses to it to whomever will listen, recognize, and in turn become witnesses themselves.

I wonder if we have forgotten how to be witnesses, especially during the Christmas season. The great philosopher and theologian Howard Thurman reflected on the mood of Christmas as a way to invite us

back to the call of being witnesses. He, too, worried that even in our recognition of the Word become flesh on Christmas Day, we have been less than prolific in bearing witness to the light of that life. Some of the faithful testify that the child was born to die. There are others who testify that God was incarnated solely for the sake of judging the sinful. Some are simply satisfied to leave it all on December 25 and turn their attention as soon as possible to the next holiday. Thurman takes seriously God's act of speaking life, not just in the baby born in a manger, but also into each of us. It is why he could declare that "Christmas is waiting to be born, in you, in me, in all mankind." More than just a date or event, Christmas is a recognition of the moment of incarnation when we are enfolded, engrafted, embraced within God's project of bringing life and that more abundantly.

Oh, within this prologue, this hymn, is an invitation to be witnesses to life and that more abundantly . . . to struggle with how to testify to God's enduring wisdom in a world bound by the calendar and seduced by materialism; how to let this revelation of the Word made flesh become freshly voiced at a time when our public discourse and the common good have been degraded; how to embrace the grace upon grace that comes from fullness of God's eternal act of speaking life in the past, present, and future. And, Plymouth, this is a good time to reckon with how life can be known and embraced even as we mourn and lament death and shadow. When God can no longer be said with any confidence to be speaking even to the most faithful, the evangelist who wrote the gospel of John testifies that God's speech arrives in something more concrete and more lasting and more perceivable than the fleeting and contested and more fragmented language we use to communicate. God's speech arrives embodied so that other bodies, no matter their language, their location, their condition, can be touched and embraced and become witnesses.

It is appropriate for someone to resist the idea that we can be effective witnesses at this moment given how much death and shadow have fallen over the world. The witness to life and light of the Word comes amid the fierce violence and resistance of death and shadow. Life and light are rejected over and over again for the easy salve of money, sex, and power. The reality of the death, the struggle with the precarities of living, the fragility of our bodies, and the adornments of possessions we use to measure our success and our goodness all serve to dull the light of the life we have been gifted. To what, in the aftermath of what has been charitably characterized as a challenging year, do we testify?

The Gospel writer helps us gather our thoughts and find our voice. To talk about the Word being there in the beginning is to testify to something eternal; to testify to the light in the midst of darkness is to affirm that we can rely on a grace that lasts beyond the terror by night and the arrow that flies by day . . . that life and light are cosmic, eternal, undefeated. Yes, death and shadow will have their say and their day. Death and shadow are consistent and committed to robbing us of God's gift of grace upon grace, but they are ultimately frustrated. Whatever else we are, we are part of something bigger. The Gospel writer declares that we get to be children of God, offered the opportunity to start anew, begin again, not as the subjects of an individual story, but witnesses who have seen the glory of the Word become flesh.

And because we have these beginnings, these new starts, these testimonies to life freshly voiced in each of us, in a new lead minister, in new members, in new discoveries, in our embrace of beloved community, life keeps finding its way into our midst . . . in the feeding of the hungry, in the show of neighborliness to the wanderer and the stranger, in the meeting and radical welcome of new people, and in the learning of new ideas and new ways of doing things. I do believe that along with the birth of the child we celebrated on Christmas, Christmas was indeed born in each of us. The Gospel of John sings its hope in a key we are expected to hear and to which we are compelled to respond. It sets the mood for a year-long, hopefully lifelong, testimony that Howard Thurman describes as "the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil." In the beginning was the Word . . . it's a Word that keeps speaking; keeps inspiring witness; keeps transforming us into children of God. I pray we will spread that Word to the world.