THIRD Sunday of Advent - December 13, 2020

Am I the light of the world? Or are you? The answer is, yes.

John 8:12; Matthew 5:14-16

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My husband Jeff has a favorite joke: What did the snail say when he was riding on the back of a turtle? WHHEEEEE!!!

So is this turtle slow or is it fast? The answer here is, yes. In my lifetime I have observed over and over again that two seemingly opposing things can be true at the same time. Life is multi-faceted. And so are human beings. Yet, we walk around placing each other into tidy little boxes: good/bad, right/wrong, broken/whole, wise/ignorant, brave/scared. We lose so much of the beautiful nuance life has to offer when we shove each other, (or ourselves, for the matter) into a box. No one is ever just one thing. Think of a time when you worked up the courage to do something that really intimidated or scared you. We have all had them. What was it for you? A first date? An important interview? Treatment? Retirement? Regardless of the event or the outcome, in the moment you did that thing you were both brave AND scared.

Life is not, “this or that”. Life is, “this AND that”:

Faith or Science? The answer is, yes.

Black Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter? The answer is, yes.

Two seemingly opposing things can exist side-by-side rather than cancel each other out.

Today you heard two scripture passages read to you. In the first, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world”. In the second he said, “You are the light of the world.” So which is true? Is Jesus the light of the world? Or are you?

In her book, Radical Amazement, author and spiritual director, Judy Cannato explores the connectedness of all creation through science and faith. On the first Sunday of Advent Pastor Tom referred to her work and talked to us about the big bang, when God first proclaimed, “Let there be light”, and life itself began. When Cannato talks about the light of the world she does so by likening the incarnation to photosynthesis. She proposes that the sun was always radiating light toward the earth as an offering of connection between the two. But it wasn’t until a tiny cell mutated and began to capture light (in a process we know as photosynthesis) that the earth was able to fully receive that gift, forever bonding the two in intimate relationship. Just as Cannato points to photosynthesis as one of the critical moments of the earth’s evolution, she points to the incarnation as the “definitive event in Christianity when divine life spilled over into human life”. She writes, “like the sun which pours out her own life to nourish and support life on Earth, the Holy One pours out its own life to support and nourish us”.

Light is a gift of creation, to creation and without it we would not exist. Still, light was born from darkness. The two do not exist in isolation from the other. Barbara Brown Taylor has something important to say about that, “Biblically speaking”, she say, “darkness is the pits. In the first testament, light stands for life and darkness for death. Sheol is dark as hell”. Life feels pretty dark to some of us right now. The effects of a nearly yearlong battle with the COVID19 pandemic has just about depleted our physical, emotional and spiritual resources. We are having to make excruciating decisions about holiday gatherings and in some cases cancelling them altogether. We miss our traditions, our families and friends. This past Tuesday I delivered one the most painful prayer chains I have ever had to share with our congregation. We lost three saints in the course of just as many days and it feels like we have been plunged into darkness. The year 2020 has just been a black hole. We have been pulled into situations and scenarios that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable and ungrounding at best. Or worse, into the dark night of the soul with a gravitational pull so strong it feels difficult to escape, if not impossible. Here, Barbara Brown Taylor offers a helpful reminder: “Darkness does not come from a different place than light; it is not presided over by a different God. Even when light fades and darkness falls--as it does every single day, in every single life--God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day”.

Science also has something important to say on the topic through a phenomenon called, “Hawkings Radiation”, discovered by world renowned Physicist, Stephen Hawkings. It has to do with quantum mechanics. And I’m really out of my wheelhouse here but I’ll give it a go - the effects of quantum fluctuations, create productions of particles that really pop out of nothingness, that almost instantaneously, partner up, annihilate and then fail to exist. In that process some of the particles get sucked into the black hole and others get flung out into space. The particles that get cut loose are radiation, or light that comes from the black hole. So, what that means is that even in a black hole there is the possibility of light. Even in a black hole! For those of you that feel like you’ve been plunged into darkness or are spiraling around the edge of it, this is really good news. Even if you have fallen into a black hole that threatens to destroy all that you’ve have known yourself to be, there exists the possibility of light. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor from her book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, “I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again. So there really is only one logical conclusion. [We] need darkness as much as [we] need light.” Darkness or light? No. Darkness and light. Two things that exist side-by-side and don’t cancel each other out.

Through modern science we have learned so much more about the universe and about darkness and light than the people of Jesus’ time would have ever understood. But as an agrarian society steeped in Jewish law and tradition, they would have understood the natural world. And that all her resources belonged to God. SO, the very nature of light is an attribute or extension of God from which all life springs and is sustained. I’m mentioning this because it is to these people (and to us today), that Jesus makes a pretty bold statement, “I am the light of the world”. With all my heart, I believe that there is an energy of light so big and bright that darkness cannot overcome it and I believe the Jesus is that light. Light that is hope for the world. Light that is in all things, of all things and for all things. So, for Jesus to later proclaim, “You are the light of the world”? Honestly? It makes me feel like I might fall to my knees. To the question, is Jesus the light of the world? Or are you? The answer is, yes and that is revolutionary! It means that we carry within our very being the ability to reflect Christ’s light, God’s love back into the world! Can we just take a minute?? We’re not just passive receivers of the light we are active participants reflecting the light. “You are the light of the world” is not just a statement or belief. It is a call to action. It is the difference between knowing about God and being the activity of God in the world. Light does not exist by itself. It only fulfills its purpose when it is poured out for others. Jesus, poured himself out for the world and he invites us to do the same. This makes the black holes where we sometimes find ourselves and each other, absolutely sacred. Because light shines the brightest in darkness. Judy Cannato says it this way: “We incorporate light into our being and begin to radiate in a way that nourishes those around us with the breath of the [God]. We become compassion and service, wisdom and grace, an inclusive love that flows out of the experience of connectedness to our essence”.

Jesus is the light of the world and so are you. Two things that are true at the same time.

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we walk toward the birth of Christ, the birth of light and love that is all encompassing and inclusive, walk with purpose. You are filled with the love and light of Christ, and called to shine your beautiful, beautiful light into a weary world.

Amen