

III Advent
 December 17, 2017
 Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's
 Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
 John 1:6-8, 19-28

Two weeks ago I offered the challenge that you and I transform all of the lights of window decorations, and illuminated snowmen, sleighs and reindeer, into lights that proclaim the REASON that the world celebrates the birth of a very special baby one week from tomorrow: The Light of Christ – Thanks be to God.

Last week Rev Ardyss talked about the account from Mark's Gospel of John the Baptist announcing the imminent arrival of the Messiah, the anointed one. This week we hear the same account, but from John's Gospel. John's purpose in writing his Gospel is different from the other Gospel writers. They wrote to prove that Jesus fulfilled OT prophecy about the Messiah. John wrote to prove beyond a doubt that Jesus was the Son of God.

"He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." John's account presents a deeper look into the power source that is this "light" that Christ brings to the world.

John the Baptizer said that his task was to give witness that the Savior was about to arrive. And when he had given his witness, and when Jesus arrived, John told his followers that it was time for them to go to Jesus.

John's job was not to be the focus, but to bring focus to Jesus. John needed to give up control, and hand over to Jesus the focus of delivering his message of Good News to the world. John needed to submit himself to be under the authority of Jesus. Just like you and I need to give up control, and submit ourselves every day, to the authority of Jesus.

That idea sounds radical, doesn't it? Submitting ourselves to the authority of Jesus. But when you think about it, this passage promises that Jesus is the very essence of the creative power of God. The light that Jesus brings is the same light that was the first step in the creation process that we read about in the first chapter of Genesis. "The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." It is that creative power Jesus brings to you and me.

The Son of God was from the beginning – then in Jesus – then returned to the Father. Not a bad place to find the authority for my life.

There have been plenty of times that my taking all the authority for my life has not been enough. Taking that independence is what I was taught makes me an adult,

and a good husband and father, but what it really does is set up the expectation that I have all the answers. I learned pretty quickly in my professional life, and when relationships got complicated, and when the economy almost destroyed my ability to pay for our groceries, and when serious illness hit, that I did NOT have all the answers. I needed to surrender my ego, and my own authority, and look for God's power and God's love in my life. Things have gone a lot better relying on Jesus to be the authority in my life.

Paul was writing to the church he had founded in Thessalonica. He wrote to help them come to terms with the fact that Jesus had not returned yet. He told them that while they wait for Jesus' return, their most important job is to encourage each other and build up each other. This is a way we reflect the light of Christ...

Paul gives a list of how to be sources of 'encouragement' for each other. The list starts in 1 Thess 5:11, so read from that point when you get home. In the verses we have read today, we are at the end of the list: Be joyful ALWAYS (that is a choice!);

be prayerful WITHOUT CEASING (even little things);

and give thanks IN all circumstances (not FOR all circumstances).

Cooperate with the Holy Spirit (use your gifts to witness to the glory of God);

Don't ignore people who speak for God (prophets),

but be sure to test their words against Scripture (imagine meeting somebody today who looked and talked like John the Baptist!);

Avoid evil – pick your friends and where you hang out;

and count on God's constant help – if we don't look for God, we probably won't see God.

Paul was telling the Thessalonians, and tells us to stay focused on following Christ; and encourage each other. Paul and John the Baptizer remind us that we are strength for each other; we are encouragers for each other; and we are channels of God's grace for each other.

We are approaching the end of Advent, a time for hearing again about the promise. But we know that the Light is here – Emmanuel – God with us. But we forget. And so Advent is a time of reminding – of coming back to the center.

The Light of Christ shining on us and through us gives us the power to change our own response to the world; and to change the people around us by the way we live in the world. Like John the Baptist, you and I are given that power by submitting to the authority of Jesus.

The promise of Advent was made real in what we celebrate a week from tomorrow: The human birth of the Son of God. Amen.