

“Out of the Darkness”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
December 11, 2011

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

To sit in darkness can cause any number of reactions: fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness. William Willimon describes what it was like for him one time when he went spelunking, or exploring underground caves: *An experienced guide led us deep into a cavern in Kentucky. Those at the head of our line held lanterns to show us the way. But as we got more into the depths of the cave, those of us toward the rear became separated from those in the front. In the winding passages, suddenly it became very, very dark. We couldn't see a thing. Three or four of us huddled in the darkness, groping our way forward, or at least what we thought was forward. One person stumbled. Finally someone said, "Let's just sit down and wait for the rest of them to find us."*

We sat there, in total, utter, complete darkness. It seemed like we sat there for an eternity. It was probably only a few minutes before, when down the winding passages of the cave, there was a voice, someone calling out to us, and we called back. The others came back and picked us up, and we resumed our journey. But those moments sitting there in the darkness, in silence, were terrifying (Pulpit Resource, Oct.-Dec. 2002, 48).

This passage from the Gospel of John is not the traditional one which we usually read on Christmas Eve, describing Jesus as the incarnate Word, the “light shining in the darkness.” Instead it is the description of John the Baptist, and in the gospel’s writer’s own words, more than anything, it describes not who John is, but instead, who John is not.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (1:6-8). Likewise, in John’s conversation with the priests and Levites, John makes clear who he is not: “I am not the Messiah . . . Are you Elijah? No . . . Are you the prophet . . . No” (1:20-21). Instead, John says that he is “the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (1:23).

Why is it so important for John to say who he is not? Because he doesn’t want anyone to confuse him with the true light coming into the world. The light which is coming to illumine the world’s darkness is unique, not to be confused or copied by an imposter. John’s sole role is

to witness to the light, to testify to its reality and lead others to it, “so that all might believe through him.”

John knows the darkness his world finds itself in. He knows full well the yearning his people have for something to bring them hope. He knows how they have suffered in the past, and how they wish for new life. He does not want them to follow the wrong path, and doesn't want them to have false expectations of who he is or what he is there to do. He knows how important it is that his preparation gives the people the honest hope they deserve.

The light which is coming is not any old light. It is the light of the Messiah. Neither John nor any of us are that light – only Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the Messiah. John is very careful to make that distinction, for back then, as well as now, there are in our midst those who take on this messianic complex to lead people down the wrong path. Or (dare I say it) even we can fall into the trap of being the Messiah.

John Stendahl writes: *We are anointed people. We are in Christ and he lives in us. We are his agents, his hands in the world. We are called to emulate him . . . we are to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. As Luther said, we are to be “little Christs,” and in no small and timid way. We do have a messianic calling, don't we? We are needed and called to do what Jesus would be doing.*

All of that is true and worthy to be recalled. But in John the Baptist's denial is the opposite point, and it too speaks needed truth. Who am I? Who are you? Not the Messiah.

Messianic ambitions for ourselves and messianic expectations of others are not just the quaint delusions of people certified as mentally ill. They are found in us and around us as we seek too much from others or wish to be too much to them . . . We are not, any nor all of us, the Messiah. That position has already been filled. To let Jesus be our Christ, our anointed savior and rescuer, may still entail seeking to be engaged in his saving work and mission – of course it does – but it also commands us to humility, a letting go of our seducing desires either to rescue or to be rescued by others. We already have a Messiah, and he ain't us (*Christian Century*, November 20 – December 3, 2002, 17).

The line which we walk between being disciples of Jesus Christ and desiring to be the Messiah is very, very thin indeed. I believe the point John Stendahl and the gospel writer John are making is that we should not be seduced into thinking that our good works, or the good works of others to us, are the equivalent of God's act of love in Jesus Christ. Nothing we will ever be able to do will equal that act. Yet the small acts of witness and testimony to that act – such as what John the Baptist sought to do – is what will spread the light to all so they might believe, and no longer live in their darkness.

On Monday evening, the Deacons had their last meeting of the year. Barbara Weetman shared a story from the book "God Never Blinks" which poignantly illustrates the idea that we have the ability to share God's light. With her permission, I would like to share it with you now.

Father Mike Surufka got the call while he was out of town on December 7, 2002. His home, the church rectory, was in flames. He rushed back to news that kept getting worse. His best friend, the church pastor, was missing. No one could find Father Willy.

Then the bishop called. Firefighters had found a body in the rubble. It was Father Willy. The investigation revealed a new horror. The priest didn't die in the fire. He had been shot. Who would murder Father William Gulas? Everyone at St. Stanislaus Church in Cleveland's old Slavic Village loved Father Willy.

It got even tougher for Father Mike. Police charged a Franciscan brother for the murder. Brother Daniel Montgomery had lived with the two priests but had not yet taken final vows to be a Franciscan. His behavior was odd and made people uncomfortable. Father Willy had to break the news that it wasn't working out.

Brother Dan shot him. Then he set the rectory on fire to cover up the murder.

Father Mike was homeless. His dear friend was gone. Everyone in the church was devastated. It was the most despair he'd ever felt. When he opened his door that night, a woman approached him. An angel, he calls her now.

"How are you?" she asked.

He told the truth. "I have nothing."

She looked at him and said three words that changed his life: "You have us."

Since then, he's recalculated. "I've got everything," he says.

That night took him to the essence of what it means to be Franciscan: when your only attachment is to God and to love, you have everything that matters. He had worn the long, simple brown robe of Saint Francis for 20 years, but that was the moment he became a Franciscan.

When Father Mike walked through the burned rectory, his sandals crunched shards of glass on the blackened carpet. He walked down the tunnel of black, past boarded-up windows, past charcoal doorframes, into a room that should be a chapel. On a wall blackened by smoke, a cross left its imprint in bright white – so bright, it seemed to glow in the dark.

The people at St. Stanislaus knew that Christmas would be tough, so they found the widest, tallest tree for the church. It climbed 17 feet. They covered it in lights, and everyone from this tough old Polish parish

brought an ornament from home to decorate it. It was the most glorious tree they had ever seen.

A smile comes over Father Mike whenever he talks about that Christmas, the darkest and brightest Christmas of his life. He picks up a worn black Bible bent nearly in half down the middle, creased from being opened so often. He skims John 1:5 and grins when he finds the passage. "This is so Christmas," he says, then reads aloud:

"The light shines on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it."

He closes the book. On the cover, on the bottom right corner, stamped in gold are two words: William Gulas.

It was Father Willy's Bible.

Saint Francis once said that there is no darkness that is so dark that the light of a single candle cannot pierce it. That woman was the candle. A single flame (Regina Brett, "God Never Blinks," Grand Central Publishing, New York, © 2010: 70-73).

May our light shine before others, so that the darkest of places might be illumined with God's love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.