

“The Light of Jubilee”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55; Matthew 11:2-11

**The third in the Advent Series “Walking Together in the Light
of God”**

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 11, 2022 dedicated to Lola “Zimmy” Davis Edwards and Jacquelyn “Jackie” Dean, our 2022 Lay Leader Award winners, to Amelia Joyce Stewart on her baptismal day, and to the Dominican Sisters of Peace whose prayers and unconditional love penetrate darkness and transform lives and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Are you a person who has dedicated your life to one focus and one purpose? Are you someone whose pursuit of a product, or a way of living in this world, or an idea, or a certain truth, a mission, if you will, is so clearly governed that you are driven to achieve this or to see this come to pass and deliver it for others? What I am trying to ask in any number of ways is are you more like John the Baptist than you ever imagined?

I believe we have more in common with John than we think we do. I don't see any of you dressed like a wild man and I don't believe you

thrive on a regular diet of locusts and wild honey, but I believe many of you live by clear live commandments and inner-directed truths which guide you. For example, “no child should ever be left behind” – in life, in education, in terms of a chance to make it in this world. Or, perhaps, “my factory doesn’t make junk.” We produce the highest quality product and deliver it on time and guarantee its excellence at the highest level.

For John it was simple as he went into the desert and baptized in The River Jordan – “Confess your sins, turn your life around and return to God.” The work of confession is something between ourselves and God. It can be done in the silence of a darkened prison cell as we wait to be beheaded, as was true with John. Or it can be shouted from a roof top for all to hear. But it is about “I and Thou,” about “me and Thee,” it is about every child of God and their Savior, their God.

But for John, that wasn’t all. The turning around was complete when they received a new word from the Messiah who was coming. Thus, his question to Jesus – **“Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?”**

What does Jesus say? He tells his disciples to go and tell John what they hear, what they see. The blind receive sight. Those who cannot walk, walk again. Those who are diseased with leprosy are cleansed and healed. The deaf hear again. The dead rise from the grave and the poor have good news delivered to them. The year of Jubilee – the deliverance of prophecy, the hope for all the nations is happening because of Jesus. You can’t make this stuff up. When politicians ask, “Are you better off now than before?” we all go back and forth in our minds. But there is no denying all the changes wrought by Jesus

in his ministry. His healing, his teaching, his profound impact of people's lives is palpable and clear. I believe it still is!

I see that people who truly follow the Risen Christ in their lives are changed for the better. They bear a peacefulness and joy that guides them each day. They focus on the best in others rather than the worst. They lift up and celebrate the gifts of the Spirit alive and well in this world and then step into sharing those gifts with others. They see the light in the darkest days and focus on hope. In the words of Paul's letter to the Romans in 8:28, Jesus' disciples live into this daily routine of transformation – *“We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God's purpose.”*

What if you were to carry this focus, this attitude, this purpose into your daily workplace and interactions with others? This is the light of Jubilee. This is ours which was cleared by John the Baptist and paved by Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago – a path to walk in the glory of God and to be part of fulfilling the purpose of God in this world – each in our own ways.

In his little book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*,* written from the darkness of his prison cell in the 16th Century, St. John of the Cross, illumined our path out of darkness and into the light of God. John was a small man, less than five feet tall. When St. Teresa of Avila met him, she called him “half a friar.” Like her, he was a Carmelite, an order founded on the ideals of a simple life spent in solitude and prayer. He was taken prisoner by other priests and guards in 1577 for his beliefs about prayer. For 11 months he was left in a dark cell – with only bread and water, not allowed to bathe or change his clothes. He was only allowed out to be flogged by the other priests. He began

writing the reflections for *The Dark Night of the Soul* in his mind's eye because he had no paper or pen. He would memorize his words for later writing. Later, one priest would bring him paper and he would write when the sun broke through the cracks in the walls once a day.

His book is not what you think. He doesn't say much about religion. His language is passionate and speaks to the senses. The dark night is actually a love story, full of painful joy expressed in relation to the most elusive lover of all. John doesn't offer any help to anyone seeking a better grip on God. In fact, he emphasizes that God cannot be grasped. In John's native Spanish, his word for God is "nada." God is "no Thing." God is not a thing. Since God is not a thing, God cannot be held onto. God can only be encountered as that which eclipses the reality of all other things.

John writes about what God is not. He wants his readers to clear their hearts and minds of all the images and ideas about God that become obstacles between them and the Real Thing. He takes all the language which we hold as fully understood about "sin," "salvation," "repentance," and "grace" and turns them inside out. For example, rather than our given understanding of sin, we are pointed to a deeper understanding – sin is really about "betrayal, brokenness, forgetfulness, and our own deadly distance from the source of all life."

I believe this shift, this "Nada" should be liberating and not confusing. God as "Nada," as "No thing" – should be received, as it was delivered from *The Dark Night of the Soul*, as a gift. We all know, Christianity is changing. In the words of Theologian Phyllis Tickle, "we are in the midst of a great rummage sale which the Christian Church through the ages holds from time to time." We have

accumulated a lot of junk which have no place in our house anymore – old and worn-out hymns, books, sermons, ideas, and theologies which need to be put out for sale for pennies on the dollar (The price drops in half after 12 noon!).

I love what Harvey Cox calls this time in his book *The Future of Faith*. He calls this time, “The Age of the Spirit.” We can no longer hold on to our old ways and call them perfect and good. We must be changed by young and transforming voices who are calling us to a new way, a new path, a path in which God is “Nada” – not dead at all – but not what we have all said God is. Sometimes it takes a 600 year-old, four foot something monk to show us the way forward.

This all started with John the Baptist’s question, **“Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?”** And Jesus’ answers, **“You tell John what you see and hear.”** Give it time. Lean into the dark night of the soul. Let the Light break through the stones we have constructed to shine a sliver of light on the hope of the nations.

So, Amelia, and all the children of First Church, the future is yours. Do not be afraid of the dark. Out of our darkest nights come the dawn of morning in which God’s new light and life shines. And in the bright morning star, hope is truly born. Amen.

* References and material from *The Dark Night of the Soul* is drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, chapter 7, pp. 133-148, Harper and Row, Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014).

