

The Gift of Receiving
Psalm 147:12-20
John 1:1-18
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC
January 4, 2015

Before reading the Gospel lesson—Today is the 10th day of Christmas and on Tuesday when the 12th day of Christmas arrives, it will be Epiphany. Epiphany is a celebration of the visitation of the three kings or magi to the Christ child. This celebration focuses on the light of the star which the wise men followed, the baptism of Christ, and the manifestation of Christ's divinity when he performed the first miracle at the wedding at Cana. There are a variety of stories in Scripture that point to these events, but the second Sunday after Christmas provides us with the familiar Prologue of John's Gospel. The version I will be reading from is the Common English Bible. I invite you ponder the concept of light as you listen for *the Word of the Lord*.

*1 In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.*

2 The Word was with God in the beginning.

*3 Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.*

What came into being

*4 through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.*

*5 The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.*

*6 A man named John was sent from God. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning
the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. 8 He himself wasn't
the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.*

*9 The true light that shines on all people
was coming into the world.*

*10 The light was in the world,
and the world came into being through the light,
but the world didn't recognize the light.*

*11 The light came to his own people,
and his own people didn't welcome him.*

*12 But those who did welcome him,
those who believed in his name,
he authorized to become God's children,*

*13 born not from blood
nor from human desire or passion,*

but born from God.
 14 *The Word became flesh*
 and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
 glory like that of a father's only son,
 full of grace and truth.
 15 *John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes*
after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"
 16 *From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace;*
 17 *as the Law was given through Moses,*
 so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ.
 18 *No one has ever seen God.*
 God the only Son,
 who is at the Father's side,
 has made God known.

'Tis the season of darkness and that is why the Christmas lights are so appealing to us.
 'Tis the season of starting anew with resolutions and promises to keep—less of this,
 more of that, but everything in moderation. 'Tis the season to ponder this Word made
 flesh, this light of the world, this life who is the light of all people.

What is the *word of God* anyway? In the Old Testament we find that God's word was
 given to Moses to write down as statutes, ordinances, and laws, to provide some order
 for the life of the Hebrew people. The Hebrew Bible is filled with *the word of the Lord* as
 an active force engaging the world, given to prophets to speak with fear and trembling.
It is a risky word, one that convicts and challenges as well as blesses and builds
up. *The word of the Lord* makes it possible for the people of God *to live* as the people of
 God. *The Word of the Lord* expresses the character of God's sovereignty—powerful
 enough to command the earth—and all of creation. This psalm echoes another psalm
 where God's word enacts God's sovereignty from the beginning in the creation of the
 world unto the restoration of the house of Israel from exile and destruction. In the psalm
 of praise today where Jerusalem receives the strange weather of snow, frost, hail, and
 cold, God's word melts them all. Something we might take for granted, but the people
 of Israel then understood it as God's power ruling creation. Praise surrounds God
 through *the word of the Lord* with "Hallelujahs" opening and closing the psalm.

Why is this important for us to understand? Because "**to know God's word is to know**
God's will and, indeed God's very self."¹ Thus, God is creative, active, powerful, and
 delights in praise. We find in these verses that "***the word of the Lord begins to***

¹ McCann, J. Clinton, Jr. "The Book of Psalms~Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in
The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IV, 1269. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

personify God and personalize God in a way to prepare us for God as the Word made flesh”² that we meet in John’s gospel.

John offers a new creation story that sounds like one from Genesis 1:1-5
When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters—God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. God named the light Day and the darkness Night. There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

Just like the Genesis story there was darkness and God spoke the word, “*Let there be light.*” And God’s word made it happen. Light shines as day and the darkness of night does not extinguish the light. The Word gives life. The Word is light.

Light provides life, growth, shows forth, reveals, exposes, is brilliant, blinding, white hot, casts shadows, pierces, divides, beholds, illuminates, shines, protects, invites, glows, warms, comforts, dances, rises, sets, moves, glimmers, heals, is endless.

How does light show forth the grace and truth of God today? We are called to be beacons of justice where abuse and abandon harm the children of God in the flesh living among us today. We have opportunities to be light in the darkness by committing our time and resources to share in Family Promise. There are 1600 children who are homeless in Pickens county schools. Even more are under school age and not counted.³ Family Promise is the only homeless service in the county. The next time Fort Hill hosts families here at the church is Feb 22-28. **Let us be like John who witnesses to the light of the world and care for the least, most vulnerable children among us.**

How does the living Word, the Light of Christ make a difference in our lives? Do we recognize the Light of Christ when we see it? If we call ourselves Children of God, then we are to welcome God in the flesh and share the fullness of grace that we have received.

I have been pondering light in terms of death this Christmas season. In early December I met Dr. Raymond Moody. He’s the person who coined the phrase “Near Death Experience” back in the 1970’s. He has written extensively about the many people he has interviewed who have told him their stories about dying or almost dying and coming back to life again. In his analysis of their experiences he determined there were many traits of NDEs and persons usually experienced several of these.

² *Ibid.*

³ Family Promise of Pickens County, <http://familypromisepickens.org/club300/> accessed 2015.01.03.

1. A Sense of Being Dead
2. Peace and Painlessness
3. Out-of-Body Experience
4. The Tunnel Experience—often darkness
5. **People of Light**
6. **The Being of Light**—Christians called this God or Jesus.
7. The Life Review
8. Rising Rapidly into the Heavens
9. Reluctance to Return
10. Different Time and Space⁴

It is these two traits about Light that I find most intriguing when I think of this passage today and the True Light— Listen to Jason’s story.

Moody: Another child who speaks longingly of his NDE is a boy I’ll call Jason. He had an NDE after being hit by a car while riding his bicycle. His episode is an interesting “full-blown” NDE in that it exhibits many of the symptoms of the core experience and is a very intense one. I spoke to him when he was fourteen, three years after his event. Although his accident was a bad one, tests have shown that there was no brain damage. And, as you can see, his answers are sharp and intelligent.

Jason: This happened when I was eleven. I got a new bike for my birthday. The day after my birthday, I was riding the bike and I didn’t see a car coming and it hit me. I don’t remember getting hit but suddenly I was looking down at myself. I saw my body under the bike and my leg was broken and bleeding. I remember looking and seeing my eyes closed. I was above.

I was floating about five feet above my body and there were people all around. A man in the crowd tried to help me. An ambulance came. I wondered why the people were worried because I was fine. I watched them put my body in the ambulance and I was trying to tell them it was fine but none of them could hear me. I could tell what they were saying. “Help him,” someone was saying. “I think he’s dead, but let’s go to work,” said someone else.

The ambulance drove off and I tried to follow it. I was above the ambulance following it. I thought I was dead. I looked around and then I was in a tunnel with a bright light at the end. The tunnel seemed to go up and up. I came out on the other side of the tunnel.

There were a lot of people in the light but I didn’t know any of them. I told them about the accident and they said I had to go back. They said it wasn’t my time to die yet so I had to go back to my father and mother and sister.

I was in the light for a long time. It seemed like a long time. I felt everyone loved me there. Everyone was happy. I feel that the light was God. The tunnel whirled up toward

⁴ Moody, Dr. Raymond; Perry, Paul (2011-06-06). The Light Beyond (p. 6). . Kindle Edition.

the light like a whirlpool. I didn't know why I was in the tunnel or where I was going. I wanted to get to that light. When I was in the light I didn't want to go back. I almost forgot about my body.

When I was going up in the tunnel two people were helping me. I saw them as they got out into the light. They were with me the whole way. Then they told me I had to go back. I went back through the tunnel where I ended up back in the hospital where two doctors were working on me. They said, "Jason, Jason." I saw my body on this table and it looked blue. I knew I was going to go back because the people in the light told me.

The doctors were worried, but I was trying to tell them I was all right. One doctor put paddles on my chest and my body bounced up. When I woke up I told the doctor I saw him when he put the paddles on my chest.

I tried to tell my mother too, but no one wanted to hear it. I told my teacher in class one day and she told you.

Moody: Jason, what do you make of all this? I mean, this happened to you three years ago. Has it changed you in any way? What do you think it means?

Jason: Well, I have thought a lot about it. To me I died. I saw the place where you go when you die. I am not afraid of dying. **What I learned there is that the most important thing is loving while you are alive.** Last year a boy in my class died. He had leukemia. Nobody wanted to talk about it but I said that Don is okay where he is, that death is not that big a thing. I told them about when I died, and that is why my teacher told you.

Moody: Jason, did you notice anything about the people in the tunnel with you?

Jason: The two people with me in the tunnel helped me as soon as I got there. I didn't know where I was exactly but I wanted to get to that light at the end. They told me I would be okay and they would take me into the light. I could feel love from them. I didn't see their faces, just shapes in the tunnel. When we got into the light I could see their faces. This is hard to explain because this is very different from life in the world. I don't have any word for it. It was like they were wearing very white robes. Everything was lighted.

Moody first began his research with adults, but later after interviewing children he realized they had the same traits to their stories. He said, "Very often these children form attachments to the people they met on 'the other side.' When they come back, they talk about the beautiful woman who took care of them when they died...**This "longing**

for the beautiful light,” as one patient told me, has made most child NDEers better people as they grow older.”⁵

The same is true for adults—they are better people.

Now I’m not suggesting that we go out have have a Near Death Experience, but what we can learn from those who have had them is this. **The light changes people for the better. It is what John was testifying to so that we could look for the True Light.**

Testifying to The Light

Light comes as bread from heaven.
Star-streams bend to touch golden
hay, soft and warm, welcoming
flesh and blood, a cry of joy,
life begins in the world now
full of possibility,
mystery, humility,
generosity, pure grace.
Adults, old and growing so,
eyes open seeing but not
searching, beholding silent
breathing, seeing everything,
this natal event blooming.
A small life, a tiny hand
reaching heavenward to know
the way home, to remember
the mansion of rooms prepared
where all rest eternally
in the presence of this One.

One who looks into our eyes
and reads us our life stories
of skinned up knees and mud pies,
of neighborhood games with balls
before sports organized teams,
of adventure hikes in woods
to artesian wells with moss
and sleigh rides teaching us
what is reckless abandon.
The Word held us when afraid
of the monsters under our beds
at night and with Light shone bright
through tears when we met with death
for the first time and each time

⁵ Moody, Dr. Raymond; Perry, Paul (2011-06-06). The Light Beyond (p. 62-66). . Kindle Edition.

after that when the Light of life
shone brighter in the darkness.

Light inviting to receive,
to believe beyond the grave
into the present of life
eternal hope, love and peace.⁶

Remember when Jesus was with Thomas and the disciples, when Jesus invited
Thomas to put his hand in his side? ***Jesus said to Thomas, "No more disbelief.
Believe!"***

Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"
***Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't
see and yet believe."***⁷ That's us.

'Tis the season to believe the Light!

⁶ Poem based on John 1:1-18 and life; poem copyright by Mary A. Morrison.

⁷ John 20:27-29