

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “The Witness”

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#### **John 1: 6-8, 19-28**

*6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

*19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ <sup>23</sup>He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord”’, as the prophet Isaiah said.*

*24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ <sup>26</sup>John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.*

When I was ministering with the people at First Congregational Church in Salt Lake City, one of the highlights of the year was the annual summer camp for the youth and children of the church. We would travel up Chalk Creek canyon near Coalville, UT about an hour away from the city, to a place where only a dozen or so cars would pass every day. There were red rock cliffs nearby and the sound of a beautiful stream enhancing the chapel services. It was good to be away in the wilderness of God’s beauty. I used to enjoy sitting out in the cabin circle at night, after all of the cabin lights had been turned off, staring at the vivid beauty of the stars. There were more stars that I could ever begin to count and the stars were brighter than I could ever remember. One night while sitting in the quiet admiration of such beauty, I made a remark about how the stars were so much brighter at camp. A friend sitting next to me corrected me. “Actually,” he said, “it isn’t that the stars are so much brighter here. It is just that things are so much darker here.”

Today we begin the third week of the Advent season. We are entering the darkest time of the year here in southeast Michigan. The days are significantly shorter than they were a couple of weeks ago. The nights are long. The darkness hangs on later in the morning and creeps in quicker in the afternoon. People who are prone to be affected by such lack of light, have probably noticed a change in their mood or personality.

This is also about the time when most of us and our neighbors finally have all of the outdoor lights up. I recall when moving to Novi in 2007, we were the only family on our street that put up Christmas lights. I felt as if everyone on my cul-de-sac was looking at me strangely as I unwrapped the cords and put out my traditional display. But this year there are lights on all of the houses except one. Perhaps I have been influential in changing the holiday culture! I

enjoy driving around to the various neighborhoods and seeing the twinkling lights, the glowing trees, the lighted nativity scenes and Santas, snow men and reindeer. There are some displays so bright that you almost need sunglasses to view them properly. Cities and villages hold annual tree lighting ceremonies to herald the arrival of Santa and the start of the shopping season. In Northville, there is a light parade. In Novi there is a "Light Up the City" celebration.

Why so many lights at Christmas? Why candles and trees? These sound almost like childhood questions for which there are probably historical answers. But I wonder if our desire to put up so many lights at Christmas has anything to do with our yearning to do away with the lack of light that surrounds us this time of year. We want to make some kind of witness against the apparent cold, lifeless, darkness that otherwise can be so overwhelming. Because it is so dark, the lights make an important difference. Our colorful lights speak to the hope that lies within our celebration of Christmas, a spirit that fuels our giving and our caring, and warms us with memories and love. In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, author Bruce David Forbes writes about the importance of light for the early celebrations of Jesus' birth. In the dead of winter, when the days are the shortest, festivals of light were essential. Even today, it is our witness to the meaning of this special season.

On this third Sunday of Advent, the main character is once again John the Baptist. Last week's story was from the gospel of Mark. This time we hear about John's ministry from the perspective of the gospel of John. John is described as a witness, one who came to testify to the light in a time of great darkness. We normally think of witnesses in judicial terms, as ones who have direct knowledge of an event or situation and give testimony concerning facts. This is how John saw himself in his time. He had to testify to what God was doing and was about to do in the world. He was a witness to the presence of God.

John's world was one in which the heavy hand of tyrants kept what claimed to be peace. People lived uneasily and in fear of authority. His was a world in which those who labored daily bore a burden of economic uncertainty. People worried about taxes, financial obligation, and the necessities of life. This was a world in which worship was more of a meaningless routine. One traveled to the temple and offered sacrifice or praise in the manner that the priests directed. One's goodness was measured by following the letter of the law. Like our time, it was a time in which there was much darkness and much suffering.

John the Baptist was not the light, but one who pointed out the importance of the light to others. He wanted his listeners to know, just in case they hadn't noticed, that they were surrounded by darkness. There was much about their world and situation that was not of God's choosing. He wanted to testify to what the world could be and will be. He proclaimed that the time of God's coming had arrived. Into the darkness a light will shine. Soon, all the faithful will be able to see the road of life's journey more clearly and view it from a proper and true perspective. God's light will shine to remove the darkness and to bring clarity and truth to life.

Peter Storey, a United Methodist pastor, quotes the Indian theologian Samuel Ryan. He says, "A candle light is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, 'I beg to differ.'" Ryan, like the writer of the gospel of John and like John the Baptist, supports the idea of light as proof that God will not cease to work, even when it seems as if we have done all that we can.

It was John the Baptist's job to witness to that light and to call each and every one of us to witness to it. Our witness might be where and how we can shine the light of God's presence into the shadows of our human brokenness. Our witness may be simply adjusting our eyes to see divine light when there seems to be none. Our witness may be pointing out the tiniest speck of light to those who cannot see it otherwise. Our witness may be in shining where we are most visible, a bright color in the emptiness of the void. If we do not witness to the light of Christ, especially in this season of preparation, who can and who will?

It is important to remember that John was not the light. He made it clear that his position was to be subordinate to Jesus the Messiah. John never claimed greatness for himself. He

understood that his role was to bear witness to the light. Perhaps our biggest sin of this season is when we try to live in our own light. We try our best to create the perfect Christmas. We try to control all things around us. We judge others and the world from our own sense of prejudices and rules forgetting that the darkness of greed, selfishness, and pride lies within us. We, as modern day witnesses, are to model John's attitude of humility, never exalting ourselves, but only what God desires, as we proclaim Jesus birth at Christmas.

Tom Long tells the story of Rabbi Hugo Gryn who as a boy was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the middle of all of the death and horror that surrounded them, many of the Jewish prisoners held onto whatever shreds of their religious observances they could, with raising the ire of the guards. On one cold winter's evening, the first night of Chanukah-the festival of lights, Hugo's father gathered the family around a table. Hugo watched in horror as his father took the family's last pad of butter and made a makeshift candle, using a string from his ragged clothes. He then took a match and lit the candle. "Father, no!" Hugo cried. "That butter was our last bit of food! How will we survive?" His father replied, "We can live for many days without food. We cannot live for a single minute without hope. This is a fire of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere."

And so living in our troubled world, in the midst of these difficult times, surrounded by tough choices and sad problems for which we cannot find answers, we bear witness to the light that John the Baptist himself witnessed. We put up our light. We light our candles. We pray. And we point to the promise of God that is here and is yet to come, the promise of light that will overcome any darkness. We cannot live without it.