

I Believe in the Sun

November 29, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

John 1:1-9

Some of my favorite memories from when I was a kid stem from going caving with my dad. My dad was an avid caver. Not a spelunker – spelunkers are folks who dabble in caving but never get good at it; they just want to look and sound fancy. My dad always said that “cavers rescue spelunkers.” No, my dad was a caver. And he’s probably been down in just about all of the more than 100 known caves in the Carlsbad Caverns system. Doing trail maintenance...leading groups...conducting search and rescue operations for lost spelunkers...or just plain having fun.

So, if you’ve ever been there, you will know that the Carlsbad Caverns is a large cave, the major parts of which have been paved and lit so that the general public can enjoy it safely. But many parts of the caverns, and all of the smaller caves in the area, are *not* lit, so you have to wear a headlamp on your helmet, and/or carry a flashlight when you go. And one of my dad’s favorite things to do when he would take a group caving, was to stop for lunch and then tell everybody to turn out their lights. And BAM. Complete darkness. One of the only places in the world that you can experience TOTAL darkness.

They’ve actually done studies. Human beings can’t handle total darkness. Our brains don’t know how to process it. For a little while it is novel, fun, exciting. But once you have sat long enough in total darkness, you will begin to hallucinate. Maybe not major hallucinations, but potentially dangerous ones. Your brain will begin to imagine that it sees things that it doesn’t. And it will convince you that it is right. A caver lost in the dark, over time, will begin to imagine seeing cave formations – stalactites and stalagmites and columns and walls and passageways where there are none. They might even “see” a light from the cave entrance and try to follow that light, only to bump into a solid rock wall. More than a few spelunkers (and even a few cavers) have gotten hopelessly lost in a cave because their minds were playing tricks on them in their desperate search for light.

It’s interesting, though, just how little light it takes to completely reorient someone who is lost in the dark. Something as little as a candle flame is all it takes for the darkness to flee. A little candle – the smallest of all lights shining in the darkness – can be a lost caver’s greatest salvation.

Today we are starting a new sermon series, for the season of Advent, titled “Even When.” This series is based on a poem written by an anonymous source. This poem is titled “I Believe,” and the words were etched into the wall of a dark, damp underground cellar in Germany where perhaps as many as hundreds of Jews hid from the Nazis during World War II – the Jewish community’s time of just about total and complete darkness.

The poem is short, but it's powerful. It's powerful, even if you don't know the story behind it. It goes:

I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining.
I believe in love, even when I can't feel it.
I believe in God, even when he's silent.

It's a poem about hope – about that one single flickering candle shining in the face of darkness. When the world has gone dark. When love has been replaced by unimaginable violence and death and fear – such as what the Jews experienced in the Holocaust. When we are trying hard to hang onto our faith but we are having a hard time seeing or hearing the voice of God in the midst of the struggle, to say “I Believe, even when.” Even when I am lost. Even when I am terrified. Even when I am broken. Even when things are a mess. Even when I'm tired and weak and worn and I can no longer see which direction is up and which direction is down, even in the face of all of this, I believe. I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe it is still there, and I am going to live as though the sun will rise again. I believe in love, even when I can't feel it. It is still there, and so I will continue to love, even when I'm receiving no love in return. I believe in God, even when he's silent. I believe God is still alive and active and working in the world, and I will live as though this is true, in hopes that one day soon I might hear the voice of God again.

So, for this Advent season we are going to be sitting with this poem for a few weeks, getting good and familiar with it, through music, through story, and through a little bit of extra time for quiet prayer. Sometimes I think that Advent is a season that we rush through, in our hurry to get to Christmas, so we are going to take a little bit of time in worship each week to slow down and to take a few deep breaths that we may not be able to find the time to take in our day-to-day lives.

And today, we are sitting with the first line of the poem – the line that gets to our Advent theme of light shining in the darkness. “I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining.” In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them a light has shined.” And in the words of our scripture today, the prologue to the gospel of John, “What has come into being in him (Jesus, the Word made flesh, God incarnate) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

This would've been powerful stuff for the people. Sometimes I think that maybe we think of the Bible as being a continuous, seamless story of God's people throughout time. And for some years and seasons, that is the case. But other times, we have some gaps. Such as the gap between the Old Testament and the New Testament. When the Old Testament ends, Israel is in the process of trying to rebuild and reestablish themselves after the exile. And they're not exactly having an easy go of it. They've been

beaten down so much, and their expectations have been so shattered, that it's just hard for them to work up the motivation. Plus, the fact that they're still not their own people – they are under the rule of somebody else and that's hard for them. All they really want is to go back to the glory years of King David, but that's not happening, so they press forward. And then, the curtain closes on the Old Testament, and it opens again, roughly 400 years later. A lot has happened in that 400 years. Persia is no longer in power; now it is Rome. Hebrew is no longer the language; now it is Greek. Priests and prophets have now given way to Pharisees and Sadducees.

And the time between the testaments is known as the “400 years of silence.” Or, in some circles, the “400 years of darkness.” *Four hundred years* in which the voice of God; or, at least, *stories* of God appearing and talking to God's people – are scarce. 400 years of struggle, and change, and disorientation, and longing for better days. 400 years of wondering, “when is God going to show up again?” 400 years, stumbling around in the darkness, trying to feel their way to the light, and getting hopelessly lost along the way.

And then these words. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word *was* God.” God always has been, since the beginning. Always and forever. And in the gift of life itself a light shone. And this light of life – this light of God's love – this light of the person of Jesus who has always been, even before we knew of him; even before he became human he still existed – this light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

So maybe, that 400 years of darkness was not quite so dark after all. It seemed like it to the people at the time – life was hard for them. But maybe...perhaps...there was an unseen candle lighting the way that the people could not help but to follow, even if they didn't know why.

And now, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Not just as a distant flicker; not just a single flame to cut through the darkness and make a way, but a light that shines so brightly that the whole world cannot help but to be transformed and brought back to life again.

I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining. I believe that there is light, even in the darkness. I believe that there is a way, even when I can't see the way. I believe that God is still lighting my path, even when my path seems dim. I believe that that light I see at the end of the tunnel is real, the light of God's love showing me the way home, and not just my mind playing tricks on me. I believe that we have a God who does not ever, even for a second, leave us in *total* darkness. It may be dim, some days. It may be really, really hard to see; it might be hidden by our piles and piles of *stuff* that get in the way; we may even sometimes have our eyes closed, refusing to see the light, refusing to let the light of God in. But I believe that even in the deepest darkness that we can face in this life – even in the face of the most profound struggle – the light of God is still here.

I believe.

Friends, this is going to be a much different Advent than we have ever had before. Last week was, for most of us, a very different Thanksgiving. So many of the simple joys of this season feel a lot more muted this year. Gatherings and extra holiday activities aren't happening, or at least, they are not happening in the same ways that they ordinarily would. A lot of us are shopping differently. Planning differently. Gifting differently. Preparing differently. It seems like people started decorating for Christmas a lot earlier this year – maybe, in some ways, even unintentionally, hanging up those little Christmas lights in hopes that the darkness of this season may be lit just a little bit more brightly and for just a little bit longer. Christmas decorations standing as a tiny little flame flickering in the cave and reminding us of our hope – that the light of God has come into the world. And that the darkness cannot overcome it. Cannot overcome *us*.

So as we enter into this Advent season – this season of watching and waiting, of preparing and hoping, may we all take a deep breath and take heart, knowing that in the midst of it all, a light shines in the darkness. A light that has always been, from the very beginning; a light that shines right now, even when we can't see it, and a light that will shine forever, encompassing and enveloping us in in the eternal love of God.