

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist  
(December 27, 2020) Text: All Lessons  
***“The Light Has Shined”***

The very first thing I need to say to you this morning is that, as I began to work on this sermon, the sermon title seemed something of a mistake. I had looked at the lessons for this day when I first printed them out for the Readers back at the end of November. I took note of the First Lesson, ***“In the beginning . . .”*** and sort of had it in my mind that the Prologue from John’s Gospel was also going to be included, and we would get that paired ***“In the beginning . . .”*** That Prologue also has in it the words, ***“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”***

I simply wasn’t paying close enough attention to recall that it was not the first chapter of John’s Gospel appointed for this day, but the very last chapter. Then it dawned on me that this was the very point I wanted to make — that in the writings of Saint John, especially in His Gospel, the light has shined.

Having said that, there is something in the Second Lesson that I need to get out of the way, because it has disturbed me for quite some time. You may have noticed that part of that text are words we employ in our worship quite often, the part about ***“If we say we have no sin . . .”*** Those words have been part of penitential liturgies for centuries. The Church has recognized for ages that confession is really only palatable if we have the assurance beforehand that confessing our sins will not result in dire consequences.

It’s akin to what happens on Law & Order and other shows in which some criminal is seeking to cut a deal with the prosecution and will say (or have the lawyer say for him) ***“You get nothing till we get our deal.”*** So we hear these words that encourage us to own up to what has been askew in our lives: ***“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”***

***“If we confess . . . God will forgive.”*** That makes it sound like it’s a transaction between two equals, and that God’s forgiveness is conditional. That brings up the issue of the quality of our confession. What will constitute a “proper” confession? — itemizing each sin? Being truly sorry? Using the right formula?

The problem here is one of translation, not content. You may or may not have noticed this, but in the confessional liturgy in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, when I am called upon to speak these words it doesn’t sound like what was printed in your bulletin, nor did I follow the exact wording in the LBW. Because both those translations have it wrong! The verb that is translated from the Greek as “forgive” is not a future aorist, nor even a future indicative — so the sentence is not conditional at all. The verb for “forgive” is an infinitive, and so the sentence should be rightly translated: ***“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”***

Why confess? Not because that is the key that unlocks forgiveness. No, we confess because God has already made it amply clear that forgiveness is what He is about. He ***“is faithful and just to forgive . . .”*** — that is God’s very nature.

Now what, if anything, does that have to do with light shining? ***“God is light,”*** John tells us, ***“and in him there is no darkness at all.”*** I almost said that *“John reminds us”* of this, but that is not the case; John informs us about God’s nature. Our sinful impulses would lead us to the opposite conclusion, namely, that God is the dark force that seeks to hit back at us for the many wrongs we have done to Him. It’s why Adam and Eve hid in the Garden after they had disobeyed — they were afraid (Adam admits this) — God had become the enemy.

Sin pushes us away from God, makes us fear God, destroys our trust in God, sees God as the problem, wants distance between us and God. That why we must be invited, encouraged, exhorted to confess — this is not something that sets the conditions for God to forgive, it is what positions us to receive forgiveness.

Sin loves darkness, because sin thinks that darkness can cover it. It is not mere happenstance that the first thing God creates is light. Darkness (which is simply the absence of light — Duh!) is equated in the creation narrative with chaos and confusion . . . and rightly so. When we try to hide in the dark, for whatever reason, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can mask our behaviors.

I caught just a bit of a presentation on the radio a while back (never heard the man's name, nor the title of his book) on the topic of leadership and the necessity to be a "kind leader." The speaker indicated that one aspect of kindness is being authentic. Then he asked if anyone in the audience had been given what he called "a 360" (anyone here been exposed to this? I'd never heard of it.)

Apparently this is an instrument used in many businesses and corporations to help individuals do some self-assessment, and from the way the speaker described it (rather sketchily) a questionnaire is given to those who to whom you report, those who report to you, your family, and your friends — and you are the only one who gets the results. He said what is fascinating is that people report over and over again that, what they thought was some deep secret that only they knew of themselves, or maybe close family members knew, was pretty commonly-held information. My conclusion: Even on a secular, oh-so-very-human level, we cannot hide in the dark.

But we need not therefore fear the light — John is the one who records Jesus saying that we *"love darkness rather than light because [our] deeds are evil."* But Jesus goes on to say, *"those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."*

All that confession has to include is admitting what is true — and what is true is that we mess up. You don't need to chronicle every misdeed; you don't need to beat yourself silly about these mess-ups; you don't need to know any secret formulas, handshakes, or secret words. *"If we confess,"* that is, *"If we speak the truth because we know that it is true*

*about ourselves,*” God is already primed and ready to forgive. The opposite of this, John tells us, is living a lie. That’s not helpful; it keeps us in darkness. Light is the only available disinfectant for the disease of sin.

This is the message of John, Apostle and Evangelist: The light has shined. We have beheld its glory.

But there remains a kind of residual by-product of sin, even in the aftermath of forgiveness. The Gospel for this day follows the account of the Risen Christ confronting Peter. Remember, Peter had three times denied that he even knew Jesus, much less that he was a follower of Jesus — three times, ***“I do not know the man.”***

Jesus asks Peter now, after His death and resurrection, ***“Peter, do you love me?”*** Three times Jesus asks him this. Do you think Peter made the connection? Oh, I think so. In fact, I’m betting that Peter was waiting for the hammer to fall, and for Jesus to make the connection in full force: *“Oh, sure, Peter; now that’s safe and all the pain is behind, now you want to say you love me. Where was that love when I was arrested? Where was that love in the midst of the beatings and the insults? Where was your love, Peter, when they nailed me to that cross?!?”*

What does Jesus say instead when Peter, with some remonstrance that indicates he thinks these questions are unfair, admits three times that he does, in fact, love Jesus? Jesus says simply, ***“Follow me.”*** Peter is home! No acts of penance. No deeds of satisfaction. Just speaking the truth, ***“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”***

But now, in today’s Gospel, we hear how Peter almost immediately reverts back into darkness. John writes that ***“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them . . .”*** (John, we know, refers to himself). Now, in the act of forgiveness — ***“Follow me.”*** — Jesus had included some business for Peter to be about: ***“Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep.”*** Peter sees John and wants to know, ***“What about him?”***

Now, there are a lot of ways to understand that question, but one of them

surely is that Peter is asking, *“How come I have to do all this feeding. What about John?”* Jesus’ response is one I heard my mother, the Kindergarten teacher, say on an almost daily basis to one of her charges who would come to her to announce something like, *“Mrs. Just, Bobby is pulling Becky’s hair,”* or, *“Teacher, Susan doesn’t have her book out!”* My mother would calmly say, *“Judith, why don’t you just worry about what Judith is doing.”* I think I make that correlation because Peter’s reaction comes across as childish.

Jesus tells Peter that John is Jesus’ concern, not Peter’s. ***“If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You have your instructions; now make the choice, ‘Follow me!’”***

Sometimes forgiveness leaves us with the impression that somebody else is getting away with something. We know we’re getting away with the evil we have done — or at least the consequences are no more than the natural offshoots of bad behavior. Let me restate that: When we receive forgiveness, we recognize that each and every time God could have lowered the boom on us.

We often have bad things result from bad acts (for example, my foolish decision to drive to the store for buttermilk in the middle of the raging blizzard has now left me in a ditch alone and cold). But beyond those natural follow-throughs, forgiveness means that God is not going to exact any further punishment. So, in essence, we “get away with it.” But when we see that someone else gets away with it, we’re aghast. *“How come they get off so easy?”* we want to know. But we already know the answer: *“Light has shined.”*

That’s the message of Saint John, whose day we commemorate. John, one of the sons of Zebedee, was “the Beloved Disciple,” and part of the innermost circle of disciples with his brother James and Peter. Tradition tells us that John wrote the Gospel that bears his name, the Book of Revelation (for which he is often referred to as “St. John the Divine” or “the Theologian”) and the three epistles that bear his name (although that authorship is seriously questioned these days).

After a period in exile on the isle of Patmos, John is said to have lived in Ephesus where he died around the year 100. His exact age at death is not known, but he is assumed to have been at least in his 90's, maybe older. John is the only one of the Twelve who did not die an martyr's death, but is sometimes called a "*martyr in will but not in deed.*"

A custom from the Middle Ages in Europe on St. John's Day was the blessing and drinking of wine, called "the love of St. John." It is believed that this was tied to John's recording of Jesus' first miracle, changing water into wine. That's a custom we should seriously consider reviving.

His day on December 27 has been celebrated since at least the Fourth Century.

We commemorate St. John today with the joyful reception of his writings that continue to inform and enthuse our faith. Especially do we give thanks today that we are privileged to be reminded by him that "***The light has shined.***" That the birth of Christ — and then His life and ministry, His Passion and death, His resurrection and ascension, and the promise of His Coming — is the light that dispels all darkness.

It is a light into which we may step without fear and in great hope, because that light shines to tell us: "*You are forgiven. Nothing is in your way. Follow me.*"

And follow we shall.

Amen.