SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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January 2, 2022

*“Long As We Can See the Light”*

John 1:1-18

For those of us of a “certain age,” today’s sermon title may sound a little familiar. It is my take on a song that was really popular a little over fifty years ago. It is called, *Long As I Can See the Light.* It was written by John Fogerty of the band, *Credence Clear Water Revival.* The main theme of the song is that the singer is longing to wander off. He is a loner who wants to be a vagabond, and drift away from his home…at least for a while.

Before he leaves, the singer tells the folks at home to “leave a candle in the window.” As long as there is a light in the window, he says, he will not lose his way, he will always be able to find his way back, and he will always know he is welcome—that the door will be open to him, a hot meal and a bed will be waiting for him.

Fogerty has expressed surprise that he wrote such a song, and that he was inspired by the image of a candle shining in the darkness. He has said that the song is “about the loner in me. Wanting to feel understood, needing those at home to shine a light so that I can make my way back.”

*…Needing those at home to shine a light,* that is what the man said.

There is so much that we can about the eighteen verses from the Gospel of John that were read for us this morning—a lot of what those verses are about light and life, about the way Jesus shined a light into our darkness. In just eighteen verses, John (the gospel writer) manages to convey amazingly complex ideas about logic and divinity, about who Jesus was and is—from the very beginning of all creation.

John even manages to proclaim Jesus as light and life, and not only life, but life *eternal*. In this way John conditions us to notice the way light will always point to the eternal life Christ gives. Christ, says John, brings light—that is eternal life—into the darkness of fallen creation. It is this light that the darkness will not overcome. It is this life that will even rise from the tomb to rejoin and to make whole all who will receive him.

What I find so striking is that John manages to lay-out the way of faith and eternal life in just these few verses.

When John tells us that Jesus was the embodiment of God’s grace and truth, one of the things he is saying is that Jesus is the living, breathing model of these good and righteous attributes of God. Jesus is the model that we are meant to imitate.

Writer and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way: “God put skin on these divine attributes so that followers who want to know how they [should] sound and act have someone to show them.”

Or as John writes: *“to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”* [v.12b,13]

“In other words,” continues Taylor, “Jesus is not alone in this word-made-flesh business.” We can and are called to join him in helping others to know the promise and joy of eternal life. Which is to say, we can join Christ in the work of bringing God’s light into the world.

You see: Jesus has returned to the bosom of God. So, now it is our turn to embody the love and goodness Jesus showed us. Or, like John Fogerty said about his song, we are needed *“at home to shine a light.”*

And we can do that, too. We can “shine a light,” and we can do that with confidence because we also know that we will *not* be the Word in its entirety. We can *imitate* Jesus. However, we should know and acknowledge that we are not able to be the perfect embodiment of God’s love and grace that he was.

What I am saying, of course, is that “context is everything.” So is humility. So, Jesus was “*the* Word.” We can be “*a* word,” like Jesus. Instead of being everything he was and is, we can imitate him by taking one word in the vocabulary of light and life Jesus showed us, and bring life to that word. We can fill it with our life.

And our good news is that we know this is possible because we have seen examples of it all around us—thank goodness. On this particular morning, I am thinking especially of a great man who, like Jesus, has also returned to the bosom of God. I am thinking, of course, of Archbishop Demond Tutu.

Type his name into an internet search engine and you will find whole pages of words like this:

“Desmond Tutu knew that justice had to include forgiveness;”

“Desmond Tutu was exactly the radical moderate the world needed;”

“Desmond Tutu never sold out the liberation struggle;”

“Desmond Tutu stood for Palestinians and many others;”

“First U.S. gay bishop remembers Desmond Tutu’s generosity [and] kindness;” and finally:

“Desmond Tutu, South Africa’s moral conscience, dies at 90.”

This is just a quick sampling of the many words that were said about him just a few days ago, December 26th, the day he died. There will be many more words of admiration that will be said of him as he is laid to rest. There *are* many more good words of respect and esteem that have been said about him throughout his long life.

What I would like us all to notice and acknowledge is that all of these good words rise out of each speaker’s *gratitude*. We are *grateful* to God for Desmond Tutu’s life and the way he lived it.

Desmond Tutu spoke the word of “peace” through justice. He also spoke the words “forgiveness,” and “grace.”

Who are some others that we have known who have spoken such words, who have shined so much light during their lifetime?

My favorite in the history of Nu’uanu Congregational Church is (and I know I have mentioned her before) Mrs. Soh. Mrs. Soh filled with life and light the words, “safety,” “protection,” and “shelter.” She took those words and made them real and life-giving.

She offered her light and life to a particular category of marginalized people who were desperate and hurting, and also largely ignored: women leaving marriages filled with fear and violence. They went to Mrs. Soh who shined the light of peace and justice into their lives. What is more: she did this in a time when women did not confront men, even abusive men. In her time and place, we did not even acknowledge that such tragedies happened.

So, Mrs. Soh is one of my heroes, but there are more. Right now, there are members of this church who are quietly going about their lives filling with their light and their life words like: “care,” “kindness,” generosity,” “joy,” “artistry,” “creativity,” “service,” devotion,” and so many more good and righteous words. I would name those people, but they are so humble that it would probably make them uncomfortable.

But, like the song says, *“long as we can see* [their] *light”* we can live our lives by it—this is our good news. Just as important: we can find our own words to breathe light and life into.

So, what is, or will be your word—this is the question, this is always the question. And the other that is like is this: What is the word we will proclaim together at Nu‘uanu Congregational Church?

Friends, the world is often a dark and lonely place. Our good news is that *“long as we can see the light”* of Christ in the lives of each other, there is hope, there is the promise of peace, there is the goodness, the righteousness of love.

And so, my prayer for us all is that we will, with gratitude for Christ and the many others who have done it before us, “put a candle in the window” so that the love of Christ will light the life of God’s beloved people. May this be so. Amen.