

John, Apostle and Evangelist

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Patronal Festival of St. John the Evangelist, December 28, 2008.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1: 14

Today we commemorate John the Apostle and Evangelist for whom this parish is named. He is the youngest of the twelve apostles and is the author of the writings that bear his name. Originally from the town of Bethsaida in Galilee, we read that John and his brother James work with their father, Zebedee with Peter and Andrew, in a successful fishing business. Because of their quick tempers, James and John are known as the "sons of thunder." Their mother, Salome, being very ambitious for her sons, has the audacity to ask Jesus for special places of honor for her sons. She is among those who minister to Jesus in his last hours.

When called to follow Jesus, the fishermen immediately leave their nets to become fishers of people. James and John become part of an inner circle of the disciples with John being especially close to Jesus throughout his ministry. He is present at the raising of the daughter of Jairus and at Jesus' Transfiguration on the mount. When the fishermen are unsuccessful in their efforts to bring in a catch and are told to cast their nets on the other side, John is there to help haul in the huge catch. He is with Jesus during his last hours in the garden of Gethsemane and at the Last Supper. At the crucifixion, when the other disciples flee in fear, John remains at the foot of the cross. It is to John that Jesus entrusts the care of his mother.

Later, as the church begins to grow and develop, John is with Peter at the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple. On their mission to Samaria, he lays hands on the new converts as they receive the Holy Spirit. Unlike the other apostles, John is spared a martyr's death, living to a very advanced age and dying of natural causes.

John the Apostle and Evangelist is also believed to be the author of the letters that bear his name. His gospel, his letters, and the Book of Revelation of John the Divine all bear a remarkable resemblance in style and symbolic imagery. John's symbol from the book of Revelation is the eagle because his writing style and imagery have the vision of a lofty eagle. His gospel account of the birth of Christ does not contain the familiar characters of Joseph and Mary with the Christ child and the visit of the shepherds and wise men to the stable. Instead, his highly symbolic imagery refers only to the light coming into the darkness. Where there is only darkness in the beginning, the light of Christ shines brightly enlightening the world of unknowns. It is only when the light of understanding is shed upon that which we can't comprehend that hope and confidence overcome fear. Through John's testimony, we see how God takes on human form to bring light and understanding to the things that are hidden.

Everyday we read of violence, whether it is the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the disturbingly sick man who opened fire on a household of people on Christmas Eve or the gunfire at Downtown Crossing that sent everyone running for cover. Every act of violence tests our trust in human nature as we try to make sense of these events. When the light of God's grace is shed in those dark spaces in the world, God's presence sustains us in our efforts to understand. John's imagery of the Incarnation enlightens our understanding about our selves and our world and God's place in it. People, places and events are put into context as we hold to the conviction that the power of goodness and love overcomes the forces of evil and hatred.

The most hidden aspect of the world of unknowns lies deep within us. While there are some parts of our character and personality that are obvious to everyone, there are other areas perceived only by others and still more hidden areas unknown anyone, including ourselves. Only God knows the secrets of our hearts as well as our inner tensions and conflicts. The presence of Christ in our lives sheds light on so much of the mystery of what we are unable to understand.

It is not uncommon for people to be depressed during this winter holiday. During these shorter days and longer nights, there are those who are affected by Seasonal Affective Disorder stemming from a lack of light. Others become depressed because their expectations are unfulfilled. Christmas comes right after the days begin to get longer again and I find it a hopeful reminder that the dawn comes earlier each morning and the light lasts longer each day. That is how the light of Christ works in us.

The gifts we exchange at Christmas tell us about both the giver and the receiver. Now that our presents are opened and the stores are once again jammed with people returning their gifts that are the wrong size, the wrong color or the wrong style, we are reminded that Christ as the most important gift given is always the right choice, the right fit and the right style. The most important gift we can give to others is the gift of ourselves. If we are unable to give of ourselves, it is because we are unsure about who we are and whether or not we will be received or appreciated.

Because God comes to us in the person of Christ Jesus, we give ourselves in service in return for what we have received. The gift of ourselves to others is the most profound thing we can offer. Just as we care enough to put some thought into the gifts we give, we must make ourselves the very best gift we can be to others. Why aim for anything less?

Each time we forgive and are forgiven, each time we experience inner healing and are made whole again, it is the gift of the light of Christ shining brightly within us.