

A man sent from God

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Feast of Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist, on Sunday, December 27, 2009.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 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 1:5, 14

Today we celebrate the feast of Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist, after whom this parish is named. He is the youngest of the twelve apostles and the author of the gospel and letters that bear his name. Originally from Bethsaida in Galilee, John and his brother James live the hard life as fishermen. They are later partners in a fishing business with Peter and his brother, Andrew. Salome, the mother of James and John, is among the women who accompany Jesus in his journey. Her ambition for her sons prompts her to approach Jesus with the audacious request for places of honor for them in the kingdom. Their brazen nature and quick tempers earn them the nickname, "sons of thunder."

When they receive the call to follow Jesus, the fishermen leave their nets to become fishers of people. In time, they become part of the inner circle of the disciples that remains close to Jesus throughout his ministry. John is with Jesus at the raising of the daughter of Jairus and at his Transfiguration on the mount. When Jesus is out in the boat with the fishermen whose efforts are unsuccessful, he tells them to cast their nets on the other side and John is there to help them haul in the very large catch. He is present at the Last Supper and remains with Jesus in his last hours in the garden of Gethsemane. After all the others flee, John remains at the foot of the cross where Jesus entrusts the care of his mother to him. After the resurrection, John is among the first to comprehend the meaning of the empty tomb.

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 again at the trial before the Sanhedrin. On the mission to Samaria, John lays hands on new converts who receive the Holy Spirit. Of the twelve disciples, John is the only one to be spared a martyr's death to live out a very full and long life.

John is believed by most scholars to be the same as John the Elder of the epistles that bear his name. Because of the similarities in writing style and language characteristics, John may also have been the author of the book of Revelation writing on the isle of Patmos under the name of John the Divine.

The eagle is John's symbol because of his highly symbolic style of writing described as having the vision of a lofty eagle. John's gospel account of the birth of Christ does not contain the familiar scene of Joseph and Mary with the Christ child in the stable with the visit of the shepherds and wise men. His highly symbolic imagery only describes the birth of Christ as the light coming into the darkness. His symbolic narrative in the prologue of his gospel is a magnificent hymn to the light that overcomes the darkness, enlightening the world of unknowns. John testifies that in the birth of Christ God took on human form to make all things new. God entered into the human condition to tell us how people, places and events take on meaning in the light of how God is acting in our lives. Much of the Bible is a history of how we as a people of God are guided and directed.

On a wall in my home I have framed photos of previous members of our family going back several generations. Some of them I knew, some I only heard about and others I never knew.

We put them there to let our children look into the past to see something of their origins. In the same way, the light of Christ enables us to discover what we have inherited from those who have gone before us.

While there are some parts of our character and personality that are obvious to us but not as obvious to others, there are other areas that are hidden from ourselves and others. Only God knows the most hidden aspects of our lives. Christ sheds light on so much of what remains mysterious and helps us to deal with what we neither know nor understand.

For most of us, this Christmas season is one of warmth and joy. But, there are those for whom this a difficult time of depression. During these short days and long nights it is reassuring to know that Christmas comes at the time of the winter solstice when the days begin to get longer again. Slowly, almost without noticing it, the daylight comes a little earlier each morning and lasts longer each day. There is something comforting in just knowing that.

I like to think that the gifts we exchange at Christmas reflect something about the giver as well as the receiver. In selecting and wrapping gifts, we are expressing something of ourselves and how we feel about the one to whom they are given. Now that the gifts have been opened and throngs of people are returning items that are the wrong size, the wrong color and the wrong style, remember that the gift of Christ is the most important gift we can give. He fits all sizes and is always the right style. He never needs to be exchanged. He is the gift we have forever.

In giving the gift of ourselves to God, we are giving our whole selves in return for what Christ means to us. Jesus gave himself and his whole life for us to close the gap between God and us. Each time we forgive ourselves and others, each time we show compassion to someone, each time we experience inner healing, we are part of redemption that makes us whole again. If the gift of ourselves is the most profound thing we can offer, we must be the very best we can. As with the Apostle John who walked with Jesus every step of the way, we take comfort in knowing that Christ is with us each and every day.

What is incomparable in beauty and poetic alliteration in John's gospel narrative of the birth of Christ, some find difficult to comprehend. I have paraphrased this way:

“Before the world was created, the mind and wisdom of God already existed. God is the same from the very beginning. It was through God's powerful mind that all things are created and given life. The mind and Word of God is the light of all people. The light that shines in the darkness is not overcome. God sent a messenger whose name was John to enlighten us about Christ so that all might understand and believe. He was not the Christ, but he came to bear witness to him who is the light of the world. This light is the mind of God who took on human form to live among us. The world neither knew nor understood him. He was not welcome among his own people. For those who did receive him, they are God's children, born not of human means, but of God. The mind, heart and power of God took on human form to live among us, full of grace and truth.”