

“The Inextinguishable Christ”

a sermon by

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Text: “Again Jesus spoke to them saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’ (John 8: 12).

Some months ago I had the occasion to speak to a group of ministers about the subject of preaching. When I asked the pastors, “What areas would you like help in your preaching?” most replied by saying that they wanted to make their sermons more relevant. They wanted sermons that hit people where they lived. They wanted to connect with their hearers and relate the gospel to their everyday lives. In sum, these ministers wanted to preach in a way that addressed their culture.

There was a time I would have agreed with that. After all, there is nothing quite as dull as addressing an answer to a question no one has bothered to ask. In recent years I wonder, however, whether we have not leaned over so far to address the modern world that we have fallen in.

What I am saying is that I don’t believe the Bible wants to “speak to the modern world.” Rather, I think the Bible wants to change, to convert the modern world.

After all, where does this glorification of the modern world originate? To be sure, the so-called modern world has given us computers, iPods, Blackberries, and iPhones, but it has also given us Auschwitz, two World Wars, and assorted totalitarian regimes that have consumed the lives of millions of people.

The point is not to speak to our culture. The point is to change it.

I.

That is certainly true of Advent. In many ways it is a counter cultural season. It is about waiting and about hope. It is not about having everything but about having nothing. It is not about light. It is about darkness. It is about waiting for something to happen that is so magnificent we cannot even imagine what it will be.

Over the four Sundays of Advent we will look at four of the sayings of Jesus that are found in the Gospel of John where Jesus claims for himself that he is the “Light of the World,” “The True Vine,” “The Gate,” and “the Bread of life.”

II.

The Gospel of John presents us with a very remarkable picture of Jesus. The announcement of the birth of Jesus is done in a way that is totally different from the portrait of the birth of Jesus that is in Matthew and Luke. In John’s gospel there are no shepherds, no wise men, and no angel choirs. Rather he places the coming of Christ in a cosmic context. “In the beginning,” he writes, “was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

There are a number of distinctive aspects to the Gospel of John. There are the famous “I am” sayings to which I have referred. There are also a series of seven miracles or signs: the changing of water to wine (John 2: 1-11); the healing of the official’s son (4:46-54); the cure of the sick man (5:2-9); the feeding of the crowd (6: 1-14); the restoration of the blind man’s sight (9: 1-7); the raising of Lazarus (11: 1-44); and the great catch of fish after the resurrection (21:1-14).

In addition to the “signs” that unify the Book of John, there are major discourses that are connected to the signs. In the case of the Scripture I have read this morning, Jesus presents himself as the light of the world. From this follows a discussion by which the Scribes and Pharisees dispute his claim. They believe it to be false. They ask for witnesses.

As so often happens in the Book of John, Jesus follows a discourse with an event. In this case Jesus claims he is the “light of the world.” Then he proves this by restoring sight to a man who was born blind (John 9).

III.

So, let us be clear about our proclamation on this the first Sunday of Advent. To say that Jesus is the “light of the world” is to say that Jesus has power to give sight to those who are blind.

There are different kinds of blindness. There are some in our midst who literally cannot see. But there is a moral blindness as well. John Newton was a slave trader in the 19th Century who made his living by transporting slaves from the West Coast of Africa to the New World. By all accounts, he was a ruthless, heartless, and cruel man who packed slaves into ships as if they were sardines. But something happened to him. He encountered the living Christ. He quit the slave trading business and transformed his life. That legacy is preserved for us in the hymn Newton wrote, “Amazing Grace.” Listen to his words:

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

There is another kind of moral blindness. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at the Duke Divinity School, recently spoke to a group of young people who were gathered at a conference at Princeton Seminary. He spoke to these young people a word that we don't hear often today. He reminded them how easy it was for our culture to claim Jesus for itself, when in so many ways Jesus stands over against our culture.

Hauerwas reminded these young people that when Jesus came to this earth, he brought a brand new way of dealing with people. He forgave sinners. He refused to return violence with violence. He offered a new kind of leadership—by drawing on the gifts of every person in society. He brought new patterns of relationships between men and women, parents and children, slaves and masters. In short, he brought a new creation.

IV.

But let us be clear about something else as well. To affirm that Jesus Christ is the “light of the world” is to affirm that there is no other light that shines in the same fashion.

Over the centuries the Christian church has fashioned many different creeds and confessions as it has attempted to define its faith over the many heresies that have emerged over the years.

There is, however, one fundamental creed that is found in the New Testament that is the basis of every other creed. The early Christian community in the New Testament affirmed that “Jesus is Lord.” Now, on one level, that does not seem like a very big deal. Most of us speak, often glibly, of Jesus Christ as our lord and savior. But when the early Christians made that confession, they did so at the risk of their lives. The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, had declared himself “God.” Every citizen of the Roman Empire had to declare that “Caesar is Lord.” But the early Christian community could not and would not make that confession. They insisted that Jesus, not Caesar, was the final authority.

Recently, I mentioned a speech that was given by Senator John F. Kennedy in the presidential campaign of 1960 before the ministerial association of Houston, Texas. Because John Kennedy was a Roman Catholic, there were a number of people who believed that the religion issue was a major issue in the campaign. In his speech to the ministers of Houston, John Kennedy said that he would be glad to address the religion issue. But he went on to say that it was far more important that he be a good American than a good Catholic. He then went on to say that religion was not an issue in the campaign. For him the real issue that faced this nation was the faces of the children he had met in West Virginia—children with not enough food and not enough education to have a future. He said that the real issue facing America were the older people he had met who did not have adequate health care or health care insurance. He said that the real issue that we faced in this country was that there were great areas in our cities where there too many slums and not enough schools.

I wonder if things have changed all that much since 1960. Today, the churches in this country are obsessed with human sexuality. For thirty years the churches in this country have argued about these issues—particularly homosexuality. Now, while I am grateful for New Testament scholars like Richard Hayes who have written convincingly that in the New

Testament the practice of homosexuality is contrary to Paul's view of the self under Christ, there is absolute no biblical justification for making this the predominant issue for the church, the supreme test of fidelity.

What about the other sins that both Jesus and Paul condemn: adultery, divorce, greed and gossip? Why don't we hear anything about these sins?

In truth, the root of the problem is that we have become enslaved to our culture. In our attempt to be relevant we have sold ourselves to a culture that is morally and spiritually bankrupt.

And so on this first Sunday in Advent, we are reminded that we are called to live by a different view of time. It is now time, not to adapt ourselves to a pagan culture, but to transform it in the name of the one who came as a light to cast out all darkness.

Amen!