

III Advent

December 14, 2014

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Last week we read the account from Mark's Gospel of John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Messiah. This week we hear the same account, but from John's Gospel. This account presents a deeper look into the power source that is represented by the light that Christ brings to the world. This light is the same light that that was the first step in the creation process that we read about in the first chapter of Genesis.

John knew he wasn't the Messiah, the Savior. His job was to give witness that the Savior was about to arrive. And when he had given his witness, and when Jesus arrived, John told his followers that it was time for them to go to Jesus.

John said that just like a best man is filled with joy when he has done a good job serving the groom until he has married his bride, John's joy was overflowing because he was doing exactly what God called him to do; bringing the church to Jesus.

John said that Jesus must become greater and greater, and John must become less and less. John's job was not to be the focus, but to bring focus to Jesus. John needed to give up control, and hand over the focus of delivering this new message to Jesus. John needed to submit himself under the authority of Jesus. Just like you and I need to give up control, and submit ourselves every day, to the authority of Jesus.

I guess that idea sounds radical, this submitting of ourselves to the authority of Jesus. But when I think about it, this passage from the prologue of John's Gospel promises that Jesus is the very essence of the creative power of God. The light that Jesus brings is the same light that was the first step in the creation of all that there is. The power Jesus carries certainly presents a higher power that can make my life better. There have been plenty of times that trying to take all the authority for my life has not been enough. That independence is what I was taught makes me an adult, and a good husband and father, but what it really does is set up the expectation that I have all the answers. I learned pretty quickly in my career, and when relationships got

conflicted, and when the economy affected my ability to pay for things, and when serious illness hit, that I did NOT have all the answers. I needed to surrender my ego, and my own authority, and look for God's power and God's love in my life.

Paul was writing to the church he had founded in Thessalonica. He wrote to help them come to terms with the fact that Jesus hadn't returned yet. They were afraid for their loved ones. What would happen to those who have died before Jesus came back? Paul reminded them of the promise Jesus gave that resurrection and eternal life were there for those who believe. And Paul went on to say that while they wait for Jesus' return, their most important job is to encourage each other and build each other up, just as they were already doing. In our increasingly secular culture, there are times we could use that encouragement in the life we are called to live as Christians.

Paul gives a list of how to be sources of 'encouragement' for each other. The list starts in 1 Thess 5:11, so read from that point when you get home. In the verses we have read today, we have the end of the list: Be joyful ALWAYS (that is a choice!); be prayerful WITHOUT CEASING; and give thanks IN all circumstances (not FOR all circumstances). Cooperate with the Holy Spirit (use your gifts to witness to the glory of God); Don't ignore people who speak for God, but be sure to test their words against Scripture (imagine meeting someone today who looked and talked like John the Baptist!); Avoid evil – pick your friends and where you hang out; and count on God's constant help – if we don't look for God, we probably won't see God.

Paul told the Thessalonians, and tells the whole church (which is us), to stay focused on who we are – focus on following Christ; and encourage each other. John the Baptizer and Paul remind us that we are strength for each other; we are encouragers for each other; we are conduits of God's grace for each other. The change that Jesus makes in our life depends on HOW MUCH difference we let him make. I firmly believe that the Light of Christ shining on us and through us DOES GIVE US the power to change the world. Like John the Baptist, you and I are given that power by submitting to the authority of Jesus. Amen.