

“I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD!” CALL TO WORSHIP John 1 John 8.12-16. Revelation 21.1-5, 22-26

MARCH 15 WORSHIP. – SEE THE WORSHIP BULLETIN

In this passage, Jesus is in the Jerusalem Temple celebrating the festival of Tabernacles. Every night four great bonfires burn in the Temple courtyard. All Jerusalem can see the light shining from the hilltop. These holiday lights symbolize God’s revelation and God’s ultimate victory over evil. The prophet Zachariah promised and the Book of Revelation declares: “God will be our light in the darkness as all nations will turn to follow God!! Furthermore, “Night shall be no more, there will be no need for the sun or lamps, for the Lord will be our light forever!” Light is a powerful symbol for God, both calming our fears and showing us the right path to take. Psalm 119 reminds us: “ God’s Word is a light for our path, like a lamp to guide our way!” Therefore Jesus announces, “ I am the light of the world!” Our Lord promises, “ Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life!

Everywhere Jesus goes, God’s love and truth shine! God is just – remember Jesus defending the poor and outcasts! God is the “friend of sinners!” Our Savior welcomed greedy dishonest tax collectors for Rome like Matthew and Zaccheus. Prostitutes and criminals, even bitter self righteous religious enemies were forgiven and offered a new way to live. Our Lord sacrifices to restore us today as hope burns brightly! In Lent we focus on the cross, recalling Jesus’ love for all people. Beaten, mocked, spit upon and crucified, Jesus prays for the Roman soldiers and for us, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” God offers hope today healing physical and spiritual illness and still opposing political and religious evil. Lent also points toward Jesus’ resurrection. The darkness of hate and violence were defeated in Jesus victory on the cross! John’s gospel begins with the implications of resurrection victory, insisting God’s light in Jesus overcomes darkness. The shadow of sin and injustice, violence and death cannot finally overcome God’s light! Jesus offers light and confidence now and will in the end vanquish all darkness, sin and death! John’s Book of Revelation offers a vision of when Jesus finally rules there will be no death, no pain and suffering, no more injustice. The final word of scripture insists God love and justice prevail in the end!

One December when Sally and I served in Alaska, I traveled to the coastal village of Wainwright to help a church whose pastor was ill. On the Arctic coast there is total darkness and bitter cold for three long, winter months. Our village further south has a few hours every day of beautiful, indirect sunlight in winter. However the Arctic coast is in complete darkness for months. The complete darkness was disturbing to me. No wonder Native Alaskans celebrate in late February when sunlight begins to return! In Virginia we are grateful for many bright, sunny winter days! And every Sunday, believers in Alaska and we in Virginia worship and celebrate Jesus, our Light and Life!

While the Alaskan mountains are beautiful and the people in our village were welcoming, hearty and generous, we grieved the darkness of too many broken families, too much addiction, despair and hurt. A few years ago, Carolyn from our village was a widowed, young mother who tried to commit suicide and set fire to herself. Such human despair is dark and deep... Yet friends continued to love and pray with her. Some months ago, Sally received a Facebook message from Carolyn. She had a smile on her face, radiating the love and light of Jesus who brought her healing! Jesus’ light shines even in the deepest darkness, in Alaska and here in Providence Forge.

The Light and New Life Jesus offers shines in your worship and ministry and warm welcome to one and all. God’s light shines in your local, national and worldwide mission efforts. In a month the Great Hour of Sharing Offering gives us all an opportunity to share the love and light of God near and far. The Great Hour of Sharing responds with disaster relief, fights hunger and gives people self-development opportunities. Every day in every relationship you and I have the chance to share the light and hope of Jesus.

I have little flashlights for the children with the imprint: "Jesus is the Light and the Way!" In the children's message we were going to sing, "This Little Light of Mine- I am going to let it shine!" I will share those flashlights when we all get back to the sanctuary to worship. Meanwhile we can keep worshipping God and sharing the light and love of God!

We are faced with a real danger with the Corona Virus as well as other dark and threatening realities. Jesus knew the reality of darkness. Yet the good news is in the midst of darkness and even the threat of death, God's light and love shines brightly. One of the greatest promises of all scripture is in John chapter one. Not only is Jesus God's light which shines in the darkness but also darkness will never overcome God's light!

Therefore, we need not panic in the face of this health crisis or in the face of any threat. As believers we can remain calm and trust God. Yet more is required of us as followers of Jesus. We also need to be prepared and act faithfully for this time and in the face of any challenge. As the Lent Devotional insert suggested reading Matthew's gospel these last two weeks, the parables of Jesus are front and center in this gospel. Think of how many of Jesus' parables urge followers to be prepared and act faithfully! Listen to the advice of health officials and medical experts, and care for others in need. Help the economy in ways you can as the epidemic will have a bad impact on many workers and businesses. Don't use prayer as an excuse to not act wisely and responsibly, yet of course pray, trusting God, as you act faithfully and with love.

In the Middle Ages when the Bubonic Plague ravished Europe killing millions, panic and ignorance made matters worse. People often fled when the plague came to their town which only spread it more widely. One village and church made the decision to not flee when the deadly plague came to their town. They stayed and prayed and cared for those who fell ill. They live faithfully and trusted God's promises even when death struck down loved ones. Today, Schools and universities, churches, businesses and college and professional sports are making good choices to help slow the spread of the virus. School lunches are being distributed still, churches continue to local mission efforts safely, neighbors are helping neighbors. Some businesses are paying workers even when closed and bi partisan government action is seeking to help. We all can do our part in many different ways.

Here is a "Prayer for a Pandemic" which was shared by our Presbytery which leads me to help others:

May we who are merely inconvenienced – Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors- Remember those who are most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home – Remember those who must choose between preserving their health and paying the rent.

May we who have the flexibility of caring for our children when schools close – Remember those who have no good options.

May we who cancelled our trips – Remember those who have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the stock market- Remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle for a quarantine at home – Remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country- Let us chose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other- Let us find way to be the loving embrace to all our neighbors. Amen

Thinking of all of you as we worship God in our homes. Rev. Keith Johnston