

Among You Stands One

1 Thessalonians 5:16-14 & John 1:6-8, 19-28
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave., South Bend, Indiana 46616
December 17, 2017 — 3rd Sunday of Advent
Pastor Tom Thews

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (NLT)

¹⁶ Always be joyful. ¹⁷ Never stop praying. ¹⁸ Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Do not scoff at prophecies, ²¹ but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. ²² Stay away from every kind of evil. ²³ Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. ²⁴ God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NIV)

⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light....¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Among You Stands One

Dr. Tom Long in his book, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, tells a story that appeared years ago in the New York Times.

It was just before Christmas. David Storch, a music teacher, borrowed a copy of the score of Handel's Messiah from the Brooklyn Public Library. For some reason, through a clerical error, the transaction was not recorded.

Afterward, there were several other requests for the score, and the library staff — unaware that it had been checked out — spent many hours searching in vain for it through the stacks.

On the day that Storch returned it, placing it on the circulation desk, he was astonished to hear the librarian spontaneously, joyously, and loudly shout, “The Messiah is here! The Messiah is back!” Every head in the library turned toward the voice, but, sadly, as the Times reported, “A few minutes later everyone went back to work.” Only a paper version of Messiah had come back to the library, not the Messiah Himself.

If people had only known who was in their midst when Jesus walked the byways of Israel more than 2,000 years ago, a similar cry would have rung out — spontaneously, joyously, and loudly, “The Messiah is here! The Messiah is here!” But only a few were blessed with that critical insight. The first of these was that eccentric preacher in the wilderness, John the Baptist. We read his story in the first chapter of John’s Gospel:

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light....

And then a few verses later: “Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ “They asked him, ‘Then who are you? Are you Elijah?’ “He said, ‘I am not.’ ““Are you the Prophet?’” “He answered, ‘No.’ “Finally they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ “John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’

“Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, ‘Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ “‘I baptize with water,’ John replied, ‘but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’”

As we continue our preparation for our celebration of the Lord’s coming, I want to focus on those important words spoken by John the Baptist to the Pharisees: “I baptize with water, but...

AMONG YOU STANDS ONE YOU DO NOT KNOW. . .”

What powerful words those are. Who was this One that the world did not know? It was, of course, God Himself in human form.

Do you remember the story of Robinson Crusoe? Robinson Crusoe was in a shipwreck. He was all alone, stranded on an island for days, weeks, months. But one day, he noticed a footprint in the sand and that footprint was not his own. Immediately, Robinson Crusoe knew that he was not alone. Someone else was on that island with him.

“Christmas,” says Pastor Ed Markquart, “is [the] story of God putting His human footprint into the Palestinian sands of earth, so that you and I will know that we are not alone on this island called Earth.”

“Among you stands one...” declares John the Baptist. Think with me for a few moments about the difference the coming of Christ made in the world. Let’s begin here:

WITH THE COMING OF CHRIST, LIGHT CAME INTO THE WORLD — THE LIGHT OF GOD’S LOVE.

That’s the way the Gospel of John describes the difference that Christ’s coming made in our world. “In Him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

This is why churches and homes throughout the Christian world display candles and tree lights this time of year. We celebrate the light that has overcome the darkness.

“Among you stands One...” When Christ came into the world, light penetrated the darkness — the light of God’s love. That’s the beautiful thing about Christmas. Love permeates every aspect of this wonderful celebration.

In a December issue of Good Housekeeping magazine several years ago a lady named Sheryl Van Vleck Wells told her favorite Christmas story, a true story that happened many years before in the life of Sheryl’s mother, Phyllis.

Phyllis grew up in a very poor but very happy family. One year, just before Christmas, Phyllis contracted diphtheria. Diphtheria was a serious and highly contagious illness, so the whole family had to be quarantined for many weeks. Every Christmas Phyllis’ mother had sold baked goods in order to buy Christmas presents for the children. But this year, due to the quarantine, her mother wasn’t allowed to sell any baked goods, so there would be no fancy gifts around the tree.

Seven-year-old Phyllis’ biggest concern was that the quarantine would keep Santa from coming to their house. The poor little girl spent the weeks leading up to Christmas in a depression.

On Christmas morning, Phyllis’ father went up and brought his daughter down from her bedroom so she could see her surprise. Under the tree was the most beautiful doll Phyllis had ever seen. For years she would recall that doll as the best gift she’d ever been given.

Years later, Phyllis learned the secret of the doll’s origins. Phyllis’ mother had taken one of Phyllis’ old, ragged dolls and washed and painted it. Then she took her one and only dance gown, the prettiest dress she owned, and cut it up to make a dress and booties for the doll. Finally, she cut off a length of her own beautiful hair and fashioned a wig for the doll. Her mother’s sacrifice, says Sheryl, resulted in a Christmas memory that will be passed down through many generations.

That's the sort of response to adversity only Christmas can provide. Light came into this dark world when Christ was born in Bethlehem, the light of God's love. This brings us to a second thing to be said:

WHEN CHRIST CAME INTO THE WORLD, A NEW WAY OF LIVING WAS REVEALED.

Let me ask you a question: Is the Christian faith a belief system — or is it a way of living? Now I realize that it is both, but for you, which best describes our faith — a belief system or a way of living? I hope you answered a way of living.

I believe this is a truth that explains why some people live such tepid lives. For them faith is merely a belief system. As long as they check off a few core beliefs about Jesus, then they win the grand prize, life after death. They believe the man of Galilee lived, died, and was resurrected, but they've never seriously considered themselves as one of Jesus followers. They've never involved themselves in seeking His kingdom here on earth.

John the Baptist had one mission in life and that was to prepare the world for the coming of Christ. Isn't that my mission and your mission as well? I know that as your pastor that should be my main responsibility — to stand as John the Baptist stood and to declare that I have baptized you with water, but there is One who is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

One of the movies that it is difficult to miss on television this time of year is the Frank Capra classic, *It's a Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart. Stewart plays a man named George Bailey. George is a man with great dreams and ambitious plans. He wants to get out of the tiny town of Bedford Falls and make a name for himself, but fate seems to have other plans. Problems begin piling up on him.

As he heads off to college his father has a stroke and George must take over the family business. His brother comes home from college with a new wife. Again George's dreams are put on hold. Then George gets married, but there's a run on the bank and he and his bride must use their honeymoon money to bail out the family business. He even fears that he will be tried and sent to jail over money his absent minded uncle misplaced that has disappeared from the family business. He finds himself saying, "It would be better if I had never been born!"

Believing he is ruined, George determines to take his own life. But he is prevented from suicide by an apprentice angel named Clarence who gives George a chance to see what life would have been like for everyone else if he had not been born. His faith in himself and his neighbors is restored as he finds out that his acts of kindness have made a huge difference in the life of many people.

One of the most important questions that each of us confronts in life is this one:

IS THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE BECAUSE WE WERE BORN?

Have we left a trail of acts of kindness that have ennobled our legacy? We know the babe of Bethlehem left such a legacy. The whole reason for this season is that His birth changed the destiny of our planet. What kind of difference has our life made?

Are you familiar with a concept called the Diderot Effect? It refers to a situation where you buy one thing only to feel the need to replace other things around it because they appear so shabby in contrast to the new item. It's named after a French philosopher named Denis Diderot who received a beautiful new scarlet dressing gown. But as he wore the garment around his home he realized that his furnishings looked shabby in comparison. So he eventually replaced all of his comfortable yet worn furniture, with new but uncomfortable items. He later regretted this and wrote an essay titled, "*Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown.*"

The coming of Christ set into motion a magnificent example of the Diderot Effect. Jesus' influence touched every aspect of human existence — families became better families because of Jesus, marriages became better marriages because of Jesus, the fate of people at the bottom of society became better because of Jesus, hospitals were built for the sick because of Jesus, schools were established for the young — all because Jesus Christ once walked the sands of Palestine. Ripples of influence from Jesus life still continue today. And if we count ourselves as His followers, they continue through us.

"Among you stands one..." When Christ came into the world, light penetrated the darkness, the light of God's love, and, thus, a new way of living was revealed. Isn't that what the so-called spirit of Christmas is all about? For at least a brief season, human beings show their love for one another through such things as the giving of gifts and generosity toward the needy. People open their hearts in a way completely unique to this time of year.

Let me close with a story that shows such love poured out. It was a chilly night in 1949, just a day before Christmas. Elizabeth English and her husband Herman had an unusually busy day at the store, and all they cared about was getting a good night's sleep. The only thing left unsold in their store that day was a layaway package that was never claimed. Elizabeth carefully put it away before closing the store.

The next morning, after she and Herman and their son Tom had opened their presents, Elizabeth was cleaning up the kitchen. Suddenly she felt a gentle urge that she should "take a walk." It was crazy. It was cold outside, but she could not deny the power of this strong urge. And so, on this chilly Christmas Day she said to Herman, "I'm going to take a walk."

Reaching their store, she encountered two young boys. They were poorly dressed. Their clothes barely covered them against the cold. When they saw her one of them exclaimed, "There she is. See, I told you she would come."

"What brought you boys here," Elizabeth asked. "We came looking for you," one of the boys declared. "Our little brother Jimmy didn't get any Christmas gifts and we want to buy skates. We have \$3, see."

With tearful eyes, Elizabeth was about to tell them they had no more skates. But then she remembered the unsold layaway package she had carefully put away the previous day. She opened the store and reached for the package sitting on the topmost shelf. And what do you know? The package contained a pair of skates. Amazingly, the skates fit perfectly. “Have this,” one of the boys said, offering the \$3 they had to Elizabeth. But Elizabeth wouldn’t take the money from them.

“Go buy yourselves some nice gloves,” she said with a sheepish smile. Then she said to the boys, “How lucky you were that I came.” “I knew you would come,” the older boy said.

“How?” she asked. “I asked Jesus to send you,” he said. Elizabeth felt something tingling down her spine. It appeared that God was somehow involved in this beautiful event. “I asked Jesus to send you,” the older boy said — and somehow she knew it was true.

Elizabeth walked home with a warm glow in her heart. Dinner tasted more delicious that night. She went to bed with great joy in her heart. But the one thing that made that Christmas really joyous was the one thing which makes every Christmas joyous — Jesus was there. His love had touched her life.

I hope Christ’s love has touched your life and that you will touch someone else’s. When Christ came into the world, the light of God’s love penetrated the darkness and a new way of living was revealed. May this spirit of generosity and love continue to spread through you and me until the day comes when Christ returns and God’s love blankets the Earth. God bless and amen.

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