

1/3/2021 Sermon by Chris Hazlaris

“When Light Looks Like Darkness”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was Light for all people. That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not and cannot overcome it. Friends, on this second Sunday of Christmas we rejoice at the saving light of Christ which has shown us that darkness never has the final say in our world. But what do we do, sisters and brothers, when the Word seems to be far more than we bargained for, and when aligning with the saving light, to us humans, actually looks like... darkness...

Six years ago, I studied abroad for half a year in El Salvador, and it was one of the darkest periods of my life. The curriculum I had enrolled in was less academic and more based on nurturing awareness of the people and problems of El Salvador's most impoverished communities. Centered on simple living and solidarity, the program invited us to live for five months in villages that were plagued by gang violence, poverty, water shortage, and lack of adequate medical care, and that, worst of all, were still experiencing trauma from a recent civil war in which the government had systematically massacred a large portion of their native population. The program asked that we resist our temptations to try, as privileged Americans, to fix the deep-rooted problems we witnessed in the communities we grew to care for and love; instead, we were asked to simply listen and walk with them in their pain.

My experience in El Salvador provoked within me the hardest spell of inner turmoil I had ever dealt with. Never before had I witnessed this amount of inequality, suffering, and injustice, and never before had I been told it was not my place *or my ability* to jump in and correct the problems I saw before me. As someone who had always put so much of my worth into achieving, doing, and helping, I felt I had no longer any Purpose, direction, or uniqueness to offer the world when I was told that I should not try to aid, nor could I aid, these local villagers that only wanted to be heard out and understood. I began to encounter crippling anxiety, which added another layer of discomfort, because, as someone who always had it together, always someone who was admired for his poise, maturity, and stability, I was terrified that my peers would now see me as weak, unstable, and crazy. I did bear through my feelings of inadequacy that semester, and I did share, regularly, my anxiety to my peers, but my inability to “achieve anything worthwhile” along with my realization that I was far less “perfect and complete” than I had thought I was, added up to the most humiliating and uncomfortable season of my life. God's Purpose for me that semester, His rational perfect order that I was supposed to abide in, seemed far more like chaos to me. So, church, allow me to ask the question again: Though especially in this calendar season we may profess and revere *God's living Word* (to use the Gospel's language), what do we do when choosing the light of the World is far more than we bargained for and looks bleaker than anything we imagined.

Before we answer that question together, let's uncover the historical context of our Gospel a little more thoroughly, and where this idea of *the Word* came from, and maybe that can be our starting point. The Book of John, the last Gospel written and the most unique in composition and content, was composed for the Gentile as well as the Jew. As such, it was important to the author of John that he express Jesus's message and significance in a way in which not only Israelites but also Greeks could comprehend. One of the main channels the Gospel writer chose to do this was through the idea of the Logos, the eternal *Word*.

To the Jew, a word was far more than a static sound; it was something which had an independent existence and which actually accomplished things, and the Old Testament is full of examples. For instance, once Isaac had been deceived into blessing Jacob instead of Esau in Genesis 27, nothing he could do could take that word of blessing away. We hear in the Psalms that “The Lord’s word heals” and elsewhere that “the Lord’s word, taking the form of commandments, runs swiftly.” The Prophet Isaiah proclaims “When my word goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.” And no more prominently do we see the power of the Word in Jewish thought than in the Creation story in which, once emitted from God’s breath, the effusively loving Word animates and ushers into being all things.

Words held deeper meaning than just conveyance of concepts; they possessed a creative, effervescent, and almost sacred power, and this the author of John realized, was the one area in which Jewish thought and Greek thought overlapped. You see, embedded in a very rational, logic-centered Hellenistic culture, was the notion that existence was very much controlled and ordered, following a continuous pattern all the time. And for Greeks (and this idea went back to a philosopher named Heraclitus), that which kept all things in balance was, in fact Logos, the divine framework of reason they also associated with the word of God. “Word,” then, John realized could be a metaphor for holy presence, always on the move to save the day, for Greeks and Jews alike.

Exploiting the way Jesus’s divinity, Jesus’ pre-existence, and Jesus’ unity with God could be assimilated into two cultures, the author of John told a story, now a Jewish and a Gentile story, of how the logic and reason of God preceded all things, created all things, stabilized all things, and saved all things. **Importantly, the Word, according to John, was not a “state of happiness,” a static circumstance that made us feel good, but a dynamic force that almost necessitated the presence of chaos. Its essence was organizing, growing, bringing purpose and love and healing and for that to happen darkness and disorder had to be present, and this was known to the Jew and the Greek.** The gospel writer believed that this eternal logic found its embodiment in the human person of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate again this Sunday. Jesus was the fullness of the Word made flesh, the Logos that banished darkness through his loving, chaos-ordering ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection.

Now that -thanks to apostles like John- the saving Word and light of God has been able to be communicated to us all, beyond just Jewish particularity, the good news has spread, that divine order, light, and love, rules this earth, and, from the beginning, has not only existed but also triumphed. And I think this is something we Christians at least superficially profess a faith in and joy for especially in the Christmas Season. But I want to push us, as sisters and brothers in Christ, to ask what we think aligning ourselves with the light actually means for us today, and, to ask our original question now: What happens when that purposeful, ordering, restorative Word, appears a bit more like the chaos we prefer to be saved *from*? The claim I want to make to you today, church, is that the saving love that we all join together to celebrate, that which John attests using the notion of Logos, is often different than we often assume; it does not mean and has never meant status quo comfortability, pseudo-harmony, or convenience, and in fact may require risk, sacrifice, and vulnerability. It is, at its core, a healing Word that necessitates imperfection, a comforting Word that requires discomfort.

I fear that as Christians, so many of us believe that the “light” that John talks about in our Gospel for the Day means a care-free existence; experiencing reality in bubbles in which we are perfectly at ease, have excess, and can live unbothered by the problems within our communities

or within our own hearts. Our society, unfortunately, is built to reinforce this kind of closed-off-ness: big gates and fancy neighborhoods allow us to shut our eyes to realities we care not to see, mass capitalism means we don't have to witness the cruel processes that bulk-produce our food and material goods, social media and news sites are constructed to provide only single-sided viewpoints on events to create interested audiences, and, finally, we live in an American society that, in emphasizing self-reliance so rigidly as the ideal value, often makes us unwilling to see our own imperfections as normal or acceptable.

The result of all these forces is that it becomes far too easy for us to exist superficially happy on an island to ourselves, where we neither ask for help nor see problems or viewpoints outside of our field of vision. **And while it feels nice, and it looks like order, to be comfortable, to have everyone think and look like us, to never have to ask for help or express that we are not ok for fear of being seen as too needy or weak, we cannot let this become the Gospel, because it that reality is far inferior to the true light, the living Logos, the Word that requires acknowledgement of brokenness, that John Chapter 1 describes.**

At the beginning of my sermon I told you about El Salvador, where I experienced both outside of myself and within myself discomfort like never before. What if I told you that El Salvador was also one of the most life-changing, growing, and Spirit-filled seasons of my life. How was this possible? Yes, it's true that I saw so much pain in the deeply wounded communities I visited; but in that turmoil, I saw Salvadoran families band together and choose to lean on one another and lean on God – demonstrating a commitment to hope, cooperation, and sacrifice – unparalleled by anything I'd seen before. It was miraculous. *And yes*, it is true that I knew self-loathing and profound embarrassment from my own anxiety and impotency and lack of purpose that semester, but that experience taught me how to accept myself for not being perfect, as well as to understand what a blessing it is to allow yourself to be graciously supported by others who care about you. **The Living Word of God, that makes order out of chaos, and light out of darkness, showed up for me only when I was vulnerable enough to let it do its thing. And now, as a result of my experience in Central America, of the way I saw what God and my fellow neighbors could set in motion in the midst of difficulty, I proudly can proclaim like never before that that I would rather see cracks, in myself in the world, and see them filled with great love than to pretend those cracks don't exit.**

You see, **God has challenged me in life, in particular through my El Salvador experience, to understand that ignorance may be bliss, but it is not light- at least not the saving light of the world John mentions.** One of my favorite Bible verses comes from 1 Corinthians 12, which names that we are all parts of one body, and when one part starts to not function properly, the whole body suffers. To me this suggests when we close our eyes to our neighbors or when we fail to address our own needs for help – all because it's safer and allows us to feel better about ourselves—what we are actually doing is fooling ourselves and preventing ourselves from feeling the fulfillment of God's interdependent Purpose for us.

Make no mistake. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to see true light is hard, and it should sometimes to our human egos look like darkness. As a conservative, intentionally choosing to get to know the liberal neighbor with the “Bernie Sanders” sticker in the front yard probably is not exciting. Changing grocery routines and trash habits to be more environmentally friendly is inconvenient. Forgiving someone who has talked bad about you, or taking the initiative to mend a conflict when YOU did nothing wrong, is like a sucker-punch to your pride. **But imagine how, in leaning into the vulnerable, the Word made flesh can take root in you. New relationships, new perspectives, self-growth, the strengthening of your soul, the**

freedom to be generous and not encumbered by hostility, material belongings, or unrealistic benchmarks of success—all this richness is offered to us by the saving life of Christ if we take the risk and step out of our comfort zone.

Only you know where God is calling you to enact this in your own life, but I, as your humble friend and preacher on this day, offer that you give it a shot. In Matthew 7, Christ tells us “you will know my love by its fruits,” and so I can promise you, if doing the hard thing isn’t right for you, you will know it in your heart afterwards and can go back to your safety net. But I have a suspicion that, after the sensations of discomfort, nakedness, embarrassment, insecurity, foolishness, you may experience something quite profound.

On the second Sunday after Christmas, we again celebrate the best gift in all the universe, the God implanted His Eternal Word, which has loyally and dynamically ordered and healed chaos since the beginning, firmly onto the earth, and **God has implanted His Word onto the earth, perhaps not so ironically, in the form a vulnerable human, Jesus Christ.** God’s Word does not operate through perfection but chooses to do so through our brokenness, and that my friends, is the good news we can not only proclaim but embrace ourselves in our daily choices. Allow yourselves to take risks, dear friends, and you will be surprised at how light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not and cannot overcome it. Amen.