

2015_12_13 Advent 3 | Sermon
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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The Enlightenment of Our Steps

Part of Advent series: "Jesus Christ: the Light of Our Christmas"

Luke 1:76-79

INI

The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to you; teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and live upright as we wait for the blessed appearing of our God and Savior Jesus Christ who gave Himself to redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works. Amen.

John the Baptist was born into a time of conflict. The state of Israel at the time of his birth was filled with conflict. There was conflict from all around and from within. All around, the Roman government was exerting their power and influence over the nation. And within their own people, they had become divided into various religious factions, each striving after its own political advantages and influence among the people. It was a time of darkness that left the people uncertain about where to step, where to find safety and peace. When would this Messiah come? When would peace finally emerge from the midst of all this conflict?

It was in a time of conflict when the angel visited Zecharias and told him he would have a son. The child's name would be John, and he would prepare the people. The time had come for peace to emerge and this child would guide the people into that way of peace. John the Baptist was born into a time of conflict, and with this small baby laying before him, Zecharias opens his mouth and says:

Luke 1:76-79

- ⁷⁶ "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
⁷⁷ To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace."

This is the Word of God.

We pray, Lord enlighten our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Centuries later, a time of conflict would come for the German people. The late 16th century and early 17th century was a time shadowed in death for the German people. For thirty years, war had left the nation devastated by violence, sickness, poverty, and death. It was one of the deadliest wars on record.

As the people began to emerge from this time of darkness, they were looking for a way of peace. A time of reformation and enlightenment that really touched their daily lives. The stagnant, sterile doctrines of the 16th century reformation was distant and removed from what they were experiencing in daily life. As Germany emerged from the Thirty Years War in the 1600's, the people were longing a Christian experience that could be seen, touched, lived. The stage was set for Philip Jacob Spener and a movement in Christianity known today as Pietism.

Philip Jacob Spener is known among historians as the father of pietism. He lived at a time when Germans were looking for more than words. Pietism sounds good on the surface. We want to live more pious lives. We want to live a Christian faith that is more than words. We want to do good works. But with the "emphasis" on the wrong "syllable" the focus began to shift from justification to sanctification.

Justification is the teaching that salvation comes to us as an objective declaration of the Word. It is a word that God proclaims, announcing our sins forgiven for the sake of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. But because it is objective, it also seemed distant. The sterile, stagnant doctrines that theologians debated had lost touch with reality and the people wanted to experience their assurance. And so the focus shifted from justification to sanctification.

Sanctification is the fruits of faith that we experience in our daily life. It is how we live, how we feel, how we think, what we desire in regard to the commandments. Pietism taught people to be suspicious of everything. To say you are a believer, to say you are repentant is not enough. So Spener would say, "What is the basis for the hope of salvation? Believing in Christ, and all trust in Him to save them is a carnal faith, not a saving faith." To Spener, such a faith that looked only to Justification for assurance led to a false sense of security. A Christian had to be proved, tested, vetted. And so this assurance became an inner examination of one's experience and one's works. Spener goes on to say, "Good works and a Christian life are and must be the way by which we enter [eternal] life, even though they do not give this life."

Pietism places a person on a path which leads in one of two directions, neither of which find their way to peace. Each is a path of the law, and leads a person from conflict into more conflict – both without and within. Take, for example, the polar experience of two brothers.

There were two brothers, Daniel and Justus. They lived during this time that pietism was emerging. The Faulkner brothers grew up in Germany during early 18th century and began to train to be pastors under the leadership of pietist teachers such as Spener and others. The first brother, Daniel went down the path of a conflict without, and Justus, a conflict within.

Daniel was intensely serious about pursuing the principles of piety. He became a pastor and began preaching about the need for real repentance and true piety. It led him to be suspicious of all other Christians who did not seem to be responding as he expected. He began accusing others of not being true Christians. He even accused his father who was a pastor of being a fake. He was soon driven out of Germany along with a group of radicals and they left for America. They settled in Philadelphia where they saw themselves as the last remnant of true Christians in the world. But soon the conflict with those around them made its way into their own fellowship. Their own community became suspicious of who was truly practicing the faith rightly and soon the community fell apart and disbanded. Daniel found the path that led to anger and seclusion. The more he pursued a pious life, the more he saw others as being lesser Christians, lesser righteous, and not walking the path of enlightenment as he was.

On the other hand, Justus found his own path of conflict. It was a conflict within. He too became a pastor and was greatly influenced by pietism. As he searched himself to determine if he was truly a Christian, his thoughts only grew darker and darker. He became more and more distraught with himself. He found that he was not satisfied being a pastor, he wanted more recognition, more reward, and his thoughts betrayed him. He looked within and discovered only selfishness. So he would say, "The more I look at myself, the more I discover I have no right being a pastor, or even a Christian for that matter." Justus went down the path to guilt, depression, and despair.

The path leads in two directions. One direction takes a person like Daniel to attitudes of self-righteousness, suspicions, and seclusion. The other leads to guilt, depression, and despair. Neither leads to Christ. Just think of how this affects us personally.

On the one hand, we experience the conflict all around us. Someone says or does something that hurts us. And the devil welcomes us to his path. He rehearses it over and over in our mind. He said that, she said this; I did that, but they never do this. Again and again, we rehearse it, until the anger builds. More and more we want to seclude ourselves, walking the path of self-righteousness. We try to determine who is the better spouse. We get angry at the bad choices that employee keeps on making and we think about how we would never do such a thing. We compare the way we do things as a church to other churches and again and again focus on all the things I am doing right and they are doing wrong and we become suspicious of those even within our own church body. Just like Daniel, we are walking the road toward self-righteousness, suspicions, and seclusion.

On the other hand, we face the conflict within. We know what is inside of us and the more we search it out, reflect on it, compare it to God, the more the guilt builds. And the devil is right there to help us along. You are not the Christian you are supposed to be. You want more for yourself, and are not satisfied with what God has given you. You should pray more, but you cannot, you are too busy with other things, and frankly, you don't care. You know you should want to be unselfish and pure in your attitudes toward your family, but you are angry, bitter about things; you aren't appreciated and you hate it. The more you look at yourself the more you don't deserve to be a Christian. The guilt builds and the more you search for righteous works, the further you walk down that path to depression and eventually despair. A conflict that cannot be resolved by looking within.

Pietism taught you to discover God within. It was a theology that would pave the way for rationalism, encapsulated in a European movement known as the enlightenment. But it was not so enlightening. It leaves us with questions. How can we find that path of peace? How can we know we are doing the things that please God? Who will enlighten our steps so we can see where to walk?

God hears our questions and sends us John the Baptist, who will "go before the Lord to prepare his paths. To give knowledge of the forgiveness of sins, though which the rising sun shines upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the path of peace."

John the Baptist comes preaching repentance. But it is not in terms of an inner searching of yourself. Rather he simply says: "Get out of the way." Stop trying to make your own path by your own works. It will only lead deeper and deeper into darkness. Rather, get out of the way so that Christ may enter. So he preached repentance. Not a

repentance that had anything to do with you or your works. But his repentance was nothing more than this: "Turn to the Lord" and then you will see the way of peace.

And there you see him, emerging from the midst of conflict is Jesus. Jesus is born into our conflicts, into our struggles. He faces conflicts from all around as the different religious divisions rise against him and they join with the Roman forces conspiring to put him to death. He is the only one who is righteous, who is true, who is God's chosen. Yet, they accuse him of sin, they call him a false teacher, they label him a blasphemer. And they sentence him to death. But does he rise up in a rightly earned self-righteous anger? Does he seclude himself from the people or the conflict? Does he raise up an army of rebels to overthrow those in power? No, he merely submits.

And in this he faces the greatest conflict; a conflict within. He submits not just to rejection from his own people, but a rejection from God himself. His own heavenly Father rejects him, counts him as a sinner, forsakes him to our hypocrisy, our anger, our distrust and puts him to death as if he were one of us. And the conflict within reaches a level we will never know, for he willingly accepts this, with full knowledge of what it means. In the midst of this conflict, against all human reason, he trusts that even this suffering is for our good and is according to the will of God.

From the midst of conflict emerges a way of peace. From the grave, peace arises. And the path becomes clear, enlightened by the word. These are no sterile, stagnant doctrines, but a living word, a proclamation that brings us life, that justifies us and makes us holy, that sets us on the path of peace with God – fully forgiven, fully righteous, fully reconciled to God. The only way to emerge from the conflict is to look to Jesus, to see Him outside of yourself, doing what you could never do. And that is just what John the Baptist was sent to do.

"To give knowledge of salvation" – by the forgiveness of sins. By the objective declaration that you are justified, that your sins are forgiven for Jesus sake, the sun rises from on high and reveals a way of peace. It is no sterile doctrine, but a living, breathing word of the Spirit to you. It cannot be found in you or your good works, but this path is found only by getting yourself out of the way, and watching Christ emerge. In this peace your hurts are healed, in this peace your conscience is cleansed, in this peace, Christ emerges and reveals those works that please God.

From the midst of the conflicts you have with your family, co-workers, other church bodies, Christ emerges and speaks a word of peace. "There is forgiveness in my blood, a gift to be yours and to be shared; there is humility in Me, a willingness to

sacrifice, to love, to serve; there is trust here, for God will resolve all conflicts, he will bring about peace, and is yours now by faith." And your feet find a way of peace.

From the conflict within yourself, Christ emerges and speaks a word of peace. "The devil cannot accuse you, for I have won. He is cast down, and he cannot speak to you. I have faced your guilt, your despair, your depression; I have submitted to it all and made it my own in my cross. You are free from all sin, from every accusation; you are fully justified, righteous before God together with me. Nothing will stand between you and your Father in heaven, for behold I live, and I bring you to God holy and blameless eternally." And your feet find a way of peace.

We cannot search out assurance of our salvation in our own works. It will not bring us peace, but only conflict. Rather our way of peace is illumined by the knowledge of salvation. That is the enlightenment of our steps. We do not create that light, we only walk in it. So, walk in it. Amen.