

Throughout my life, I have been to many worship services. During seminary I had the opportunity to attend an Easter Service at Duke Chapel which seats 1,800 people and is one of the tallest buildings in Durham, North Carolina.ⁱ

They started the service with a reading we usually hear on Good Friday where Jesus was crucified on the cross and darkness ensued. I thought, “Well that’s new...usually on Easter we start with the resurrection.”

The Scripture was read, and everything went completely black. I mean so dark you could not see the hand in front of your face. Eventually my eyes adjusted, and I could only make out the shadows that I knew were people around me.

We sat this way in the darkness for about 10 minutes. Then something amazing happened. All the sudden there seemed to be a light in the distance at the back of the sanctuary. The aisle itself is 150 feet long so the light at the back looked like a tiny pinprick.

As the young acolyte slowly walked up the aisle the whole room seemed to slowly fill with the glowing light. The light that had started as a faint pinprick now filled the whole room. People who were shadows now all became visible in the light of Christ.

I learned two things that day. The light of Christ is powerful because it illumines our own darkness in our lives and illumines the gift of the body of Christ.

Today we give thanks that Jesus Christ continues to illumine the darkness of our lives by showing us which way to go.

Now more than ever Methodists are asking “Which Way, Lord?” Whether we are asking ourselves the simple question about starting new ministries, or whether we are asking the deep and serious questions about what will happen to our denomination after General Conference, now more than ever as a denomination we are asking for God’s direction.

It is easy for us to think that no one has been in this situation before. But as we look throughout history, our United Methodist denomination, and the Bible we see that many Christians have found themselves in this same situation.

This past Monday we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day. One day at a college rally Dr. King shared that everyone has the power to choose the faithful way forward he said: “If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”ⁱⁱWhile

Martin Luther King Jr. was very confident in his faith and the direction God was calling him to go, we see that John Wesley, the founder of our denomination, found himself lost and not knowing which way to go.

You see John Wesley knew that he had been saved by God due to his profession of faith. He started the Methodist movement by showing people that church can happen outside the walls of the church, that accountability is important, and that we are called to both personal and social holiness.

Although John Wesley seemed to have it all and be very successful, by his own personal admission, John Wesley did not believe that he had enough faith, he did not feel that he was saved within his heart.

Although Wesley had the head knowledge of Christ, he had not yet felt the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. In Rob Fuquay’s book “Which Way, Lord” we see through Wesley’s journal his experience as he said: “I who went to America to convert others...was never myself converted to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ When he was back in London he accepted the invitation of a friend to attend a Moravian religious meeting and it was there that “Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed.”^{iv}

If John Wesley, someone strong in his faith who had dedicated his life to sharing the good news experienced a period of questioning his faith and next steps in life, than we too can admit to God and each other that we have also asked “Which way, Lord?” at different points in our lives.

In our Scripture for today from Isaiah we see God’s promise to lead God’s people out of darkness and into the light: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). We know that God literally became fire to lead the Israelites to the promised land by night guiding their way. God the Father who provided this light in the Old Testament now extends this role to Jesus Christ who comes to be the light of the world for all who will believe in him (John 1).

In our Gospel lesson for today in Matthew 4, we hear again the call story of Andrew and Peter. This time Jesus does not say: “Come and see,” as he did in John 1, this time Jesus’ invitation takes on a different form, he says: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people” (Matthew 4:19). We see that immediately Andrew and Peter followed Jesus followed by James and John.

Now we don't know if these men were asking “Which Way, Lord?” They could have been completely content with their lives. But just like God remind us time and time again in Scripture, sometimes we just don't know what we are missing until we encounter Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday we talked about the Apostle Paul and how after his encounter with Jesus Christ he chose a new way forward to be the greatest evangelist of his time. We know he worked with many churches teaching them how to faithfully be the body of Christ, teaching them to follow the way of Jesus.

In our New Testament Scripture from the book of 1 Corinthians we see Paul teaching the church at Corinth how to live out their faith. At that time, they were giving a lot of glory to their pastors and each other for their successes, but Paul pointed out that all the glory belongs to God.

Paul also shared that living out their faith meant they would become “fools for Christ” acting in a manner that others may not understand. We too must know that when we decide to follow Jesus Christ others may not understand why we make the decisions we make for God's glory.

When we choose God's light over the darkness of the world, others may not understand why we have seemed to pick the most difficult path rather than the easy path.

If the Apostle Paul was still here today, I wonder what he would say to our church. I am certain he would have some positive encouragement to share with us, but I wonder how Paul would challenge us like Martin Luther King Jr. to move forward in the embodiment of our faith.

Today I have tasked you to bring a personal mission statement with you. I have extra index cards if you need something to write on. You do not have to put your name on the card. These personal mission statements that we will put in the offering plate today is our declaration that our hearts have been “strangely warmed” by the Holy Spirit and we are choosing to do something about it.

Just as John Wesley was propelled into additional mission and ministry after he had this encounter, we too are being called to follow Jesus as we too are invited to go fishing for people so that we too can make disciples of Jesus Christ.

We are able to most closely follow Jesus when we do a spiritual inventory of our lives. We have to ask ourselves the question: Do we feel like we are stuck in the darkness of sin or evil, or do we feel like we are moving forward into God’s marvelous light?

When we move forward to follow Christ, we must also know the ways in which God has gifted us to serve and where God wants us to grow in serving. Some of you here today know exactly how God has gifted you and you are ready to serve; others are still trying to figure that out.

Or perhaps your situation in life has changed and you can no longer serve in the same capacity you did before. God is still calling you to serve.

In Acts 9, that day on the road to Damascus Saul had a decision to make. Would he turn back and go the way he came, blind and by himself, or would he go forward led by an ambassador in the body of Christ?

As we follow Jesus Christ today and choose God’s way of light, we do not do this alone. We know that Saul had Ananias to lead him to safety after he was blinded by Christ, Martin Luther King Jr. had a whole movement of people who were calling for others to practice God’s love through equality. John Wesley had the Moravians to encourage him in his faith. Andrew had Peter and James had John.

So today we have one another as we choose to step into the light of God. Christ is our leader, and we too like the first disciples are called to follow Christ immediately.

May we be a church and charge who takes this light of Christ to others in our community: to the lonely, to those who are poor, to those who are sick or grieving, to those who do not know God.

Like the Apostle Paul we are called to be a beacon of hope as we too become “fools for Christ.”

My hope is that next Sunday after reading all your mission statements that I as your pastor as am to discern a clear way forward for each of our churches as we embody our faith in Jesus Christ in the community.

The good news for all of us today is that God is calling us follow Christ, but are we listening and are we choosing the way of Jesus Christ or the way of the world?

Like John Wesley experienced through his period of discernment, we can sometimes find ourselves discouraged. We may compare ourselves to each other and think we are not doing enough, or we are not enough like someone else in the way we embody our faith.

I say to you today, do not be discouraged. Like the advice of Martin Luther King Jr., we are called to keep moving forward all for the glory of God. Maybe you currently find yourself in a period of darkness for whatever reason. That happens to all of us, just know just as I experienced the light of Christ in a profound way on Easter morning, this same light of Christ is available to you every day.

Christ’s light illumines our darkness and dispels our fear. Christ also reminds us through his light that the body of Christ has been there all along to help us along the way.

May we be a church that encourages one another as we follow Christ and embody the light of Christ to others. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duke_Chapel

ⁱⁱ <https://literarydevices.net/if-you-cant-fly-then-run/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rob Fuquay. “Which Way, Lord?”

^{iv} Ibid, P. 13.

Additional Source

The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995,