

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 March 26, 2017; Live in the Light; Lent 4A  
 1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. And God said it was good.

The Gospel of John begins with this breathtaking statement: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What has come into being in him was life – and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

We have met on our Lenten journey through John's gospel the Samaritan woman – Nicodemus – today we meet The Man Who Was Born Blind – another outcast from his society – we have been thinking about how societies divide themselves, the walls we build for those not just like us – and this man's story is also about being forced by the society to live on the margins of society. But we also learn that this blind man "sees" God's truth so much better than those who spend their time studying and talking about God – even when he's not looking for it.

This man didn't come to Jesus to ask to be healed – he was begging there as Jesus and the disciples walked by – the disciples see the him and ask right away for a judgment from Jesus – who's the real sinner? The man? His parents? But Jesus says, Neither – and uses this opportunity - which got him in trouble with the authorities - outside the religious building and the religious rules, to heal the man – using the means that reminds us a bit of baptism, with water and mud – the blind man now sees! And as this healed man is questioned by authorities, by people who knew him "when", he makes the profound faith statement – if this man were not from God he could do nothing.

Again, it's the outcast who "gets it". It's the outcast Jesus speaks to. It's the outcast Jesus finds. It's the outcast who testifies. It's the outcast who sees in a new way and tells others about it! It's the person considered "other" who lives in the light of transformation, of Jesus' love. And that light of transformation is meant for everyone! Everyone! Then and now! Each of us here this morning – no exceptions – everyone!

This story is meant to show that we too can be people of that light, in fact are called to be people of that light. We can turn darkness into light. Just as Jesus changed the life of the Samaritan woman by giving her dignity, by giving her purpose, by giving her a new identity, by asking her to do something for him – give him a drink – so the Man Born Blind is given a new lease on life. And so we too - as individuals and as church – are called to be people of that light, called to turn darkness into light. And we, too, will hear God proclaim that it's good.

Turning darkness into light doesn't always happen overnight, though, does it. It can, but it's unusual. We talk about this in Bread for the Journey – the physical detox doesn't take nearly as long as the emotional detox – in fact, that's a lifetime effort. The

light doesn't shine like the sun right away – but it does get brighter and brighter as we are able to turn our lives over to our Higher Power, as we are able to learn to make better decisions, as we learn to depend on each other for the support we need to keep that light burning. Sometimes it dims for sure – but it doesn't go out.

And so it is for the church.

Yesterday was the annual meeting of the New Jersey Association of the United Church of Christ. Over 65 delegates and clergy gathered in Chatham – yes, for business – hearing reports, passing a budget – all those routine things that happen at any annual meeting. But there was more, much more to this meeting.

We had a dream session, a visioning session and that was exciting. We heard the story of a church in our association that once had 3,000 people attending worship every Sunday morning – 3 services! Their building is huge and was alive on Sundays and throughout the week.

Slowly but surely, though, the membership eroded for a variety of reasons – we know the world has changed since the 60's and we have to accept that, the building quieted, and they were left with only about 25 people in worship, they were drawing down on their significant endowment to keep the doors open. The light they had lived in for many years was now but an ember – and they were forced to really, really think about what their future would hold. Questions like, Is it time to say, well done good and faithful servant – is it time to close and perhaps become a gift to another church. Do we have a reason for continuing? If we disappear, will anybody miss us? Tough questions but they wrestled with them.

This wasn't easy for those embers of people as you can imagine. They prayed, talked, meditated, prayed some more – they stayed with it – they had to have the conversation about dying. They had to have hard conversations about their building – to consider the question, who, what, would we be without our building? They knew the church was more than the building but the bigger question was, what do we have to offer to a changing world?

Friends, they decided not to let the ember die. They worked hard – discerning what it was they want to stand for. Letting the community know what they stand for. What are the unique hungers, needs, questions of our community? How do we serve Jesus in our community?

It didn't happen overnight – but that light is shining – brightly – they have received that gift of transformation, of new life! Hasn't always been easy but that gift of new sight is precious. Today they receive a new members' class of 20 people – in the past year they have taken in over 60 new members – new disciples who have discovered what that church stands for and who want to walk with them on a shared journey – this church decided not to let the ember die and discovered what would fan those embers into

the bright light of Jesus' love. They did the hard work of discernment and the growth follows.

And yesterday, we also welcomed a new church into the New Jersey Association, United Church of Christ: the Church of Living Waters, based in Newark. I'd like you to hear their mission statement: "We are the voice and the hand that God is using to encourage people to change their lives by offering them hope, comfort, and peace. We are committed to a ministry of restoration and reconciliation for all. We endeavor to offer ourselves, our church, as a safe place to those seeking spiritual guidance, answers to questions, physical healing, emotional stability and intellectual wisdom. We endeavor to train people to be committed servant leaders, prepared to meet the needs of the community. We endeavor to meet the needs of our community as well as the needs of those God directs to our church."

Some of their ministries in the city of Newark include wholeness and health ministries, food pantries, men's and women's ministries, prayer ministries, an awesome music ministry, and very specific ways to help – food collections, diaper and wipe collections, soup kitchens for instance.

What a testimony to the light shining in and through these people – a new light shining in Newark and in one of our neighboring communities. A light of justice for all people and a light of respect for the dignity of every, every human being.

The excitement there in Chatham yesterday was palpable as we heard their story, as we committed to walking together in covenant – we are so blessed to be part of this awesome story. Jesus is the light of the world and the darkness has been overcome! Praise God for that!

Those of us at that meeting came away with an excitement and joy of our shared ministries – and I will tell you after over two years of working with these people and the Church and Ministry commission I am privileged to chair - in meetings, of phone calls, of paperwork, more meetings, when the vote was loudly unanimously proclaimed to a standing ovation, there were many of us who had tears in our eyes – sacred water indeed, representing new life among us, a light shining brightly.

There is something you and I can do for Jesus. There is something you and I are called to do for Jesus. Maybe we don't know what it is yet, but whatever it is, it will heal you and me and heal the world – and God knows, our world still needs healing. Let's find out what that something is – together!

Looking at the world in which we live, there is not much time given to us to ask such questions. Lent means to be such a time. Once Easter arrives, though, it is time to follow the examples of The Man Born Blind and the Samaritan Woman, that church who moved from ember to open flame, the Church of Living Waters making a difference to the people of Newark.

So, let us reveal, reflect, burn with the Light of Christ. We come to church to be near the Light, to be touched by the Light, to see Jesus. Don't turn off that light when you go out the door. Think bigger. Let God's love within you show to others. Be a blinding light of God.

Frederick Buechner offers this challenge: By sheltering a spark, an ember, with a pair of cupped hands and blowing on it, the Light of the World gets enough of a fire going to change the world. All you're asked to do is take a step or two forward through the darkness and start digging in.

We too can be people of the Light, of Jesus the Light of the World. So may it be for each one of us. Amen.