

The Third Sunday after Epiphany • January 24, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 4:14-21

"Seeing by Hearing"

Are you afraid of the dark? It might seem like a silly question, especially if it's been a long time since you've needed a nightlight or a "blankie" to make it through the night. You're all grown up! Why would you be afraid of the dark? It's not like it's really an issue anymore, now that we have light on demand: you can flick a switch and illuminate an entire room, or carry a flashlight that cuts a wide swath of light through the darkness outside. When it comes down to it, it's not really the dark that frightens us, is it? It's what might be out there *in* the dark. If you've been out camping with your friends or family, out there in the middle of the woods, an overcast night can make you appreciate just how truly dark the night can get. As you lie there in your tent, you can start to hear the sounds of the forest, the things out there in the woods. Even if you've not been camping, if you've been at home by yourself – a familiar space, where you can probably find your way even in the dark – in the deep up the night you might begin to hear strange sounds, creaks and noises that you can't quite place... *What was that?* Fear and anxiety start to build up as you imagine just what might be out there. Hearing, you see, might just make things worse.

There can be dark days and dark times in our lives. These are days when we feel fear and anxiety pressing in upon us. Sometimes that darkness comes in a time of uncertainty and transition: going off to a new school, starting a new job – or losing your job – beginning a new life in marriage, or losing a loved one. In times of illness, financial hardship, or death, you can certainly perceive the darkness, even though you might not see it with your eyes. In these situations, too, hearing can make things worse: hearing the tales of people who share similar experiences might only serve as fuel for our anxieties. Hearing the doctor's report, "I think we need more tests," can build a deep dread within us. The fear and darkness mount up all around.

The people of Haiti are certainly experiencing dark days and dark times. In these days and weeks following the initial impact of the earthquake there, we are beginning to hear reports of the secondary effects of this disaster: infections taking hold and disease spreading due to lack of medical supplies, people wanting for food and water as basic needs for life. As the darkness seemingly continues to grow, people are offering thoughts as to "Why?", why God would have allowed this to happen. In truth, all we can say is that we do not know, because God has not *told* us why.

But there are other reports coming out of Haiti. Even past few days, we've heard of people being rescued from collapsed buildings after being trapped for hours or days. Their stories are similar when you hear them: people, going about their daily routines, suddenly found themselves trapped in darkness beneath tons of rubble and debris in the wake of the earthquake. But before long, they hear voices, voices of the people who would not abandon them and leave them to lie in the rubble. They can hear the voices growing louder and can begin to communicate through the darkness. They hear the sound of concrete and bricks being cleared away – then the light breaks through, and a hand reaches down to pull them out and rescue them from their imprisonment in the dark.

Jesus comes into our dark days, into our dark times. In our Gospel text from St. Luke, we hear Jesus proclaiming liberty, restoration of sight to the blind, the year of the Lord's favor. But when Jesus speaks the word, this truth, **he makes it happen**. Jesus is doing these things for the people even as they hear his words. In that very day, the prophecy through Isaiah is being fulfilled in their midst. All those who hear Jesus are welcome to receive God's gifts. Here, hearing makes things better. Jesus, the Word of God, brings light and sight into our darkness. Hearing his voice, we soon

see his hand reaching down to rescue us from the rubble of sin and death. He would not abandon us; he would not leave us lie, trapped in the darkness of this fallen and falling-down world.

What have you heard today in worship? What words have reached your ears? Have your ears been closed by familiarity – hearing the same words week after week, what is new to them? Is the word making it past the boundaries of the ears to reach heart and mind? Are we like the people of Nazareth who were so familiar with this Jesus who had grown up among them that, though they initially marveled at the gracious words that came from his mouth, would turn and try to be rid of him by throwing him off a cliff? Sometimes we don't hear Jesus' message as it is proclaimed; our ears disconnect when our attention wanders. But if we listen, if we really hear God's Word in the readings as we gather together as His people in worship and as we spend time with it in devotions and Bible study, we will hear God's instruction for us, along with what God has done and what He continues to do as He works among us today. In the liturgy of the church, we hear the forgiveness of our sins and we sing and celebrate with angels, archangels, and all the saints in heaven. As we hear God's Word shared in these ways, Jesus comes to us and brings us out of the darkness.

We are hearing to see. That's not all that strange of a thing as it might first seem. Think about the world around us. Bats, which are blind as... well, bats, can fly through the darkness of the night, using their hearing to perceive the world around them, catching their food by snatching tiny insects out of the sky. Humans learned from this, and we have sonar. Using sonar, massive submarines navigate the darkness of the ocean depths, where the light of the sun cannot reach. They travel immense distances, avoiding the obstacles of the ocean floor, without the benefit of sight. We Christians hear God's Word, but to what end? In Psalm 119:105, we hear that God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. His Word guides us, because hearing, we see. We see the cross. We see God's love for His fallen creation, His love for us in Jesus. Hearing God's Word changes how we live. When we are confronted by the darkness around us, even as it is closing in, we hear God's message, "Do not fear." Our God is with us. Even though we still live in a dark world, we are not left in the dark. God guide and directs us, restoring sight when we were once blind to the possibilities around us, shedding light on a way ahead that had been shrouded in darkness and hopelessness.

In this Epiphany season, we hear about God revealing Himself to the world: the star, shining down to where Jesus could be found by those wise men from the East; at Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and the Father's voice proclaiming, "This is my beloved Son;" the miracle at Cana, where Jesus transformed ordinary water into fine wine. God reveals Himself through His Word, for you and for the world around you. At the close of our worship service this weekend, we hear the sending: "Go in peace. Share the good news." Hearing God's Word, we respond. We can bring Epiphany out into the world through in our lives, shining as beacons of Christ's love as we share the good news of God's Word. What will the people out there, people who, like us, know darkness in their lives, hear from us? Through you –and in you – the light of Christ banishes the darkness.

Hearing God's Word, we see Jesus. We don't have to be afraid of the dark anymore.
Amen.