WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

SERMON

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The Call of the Church

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Perhaps you noticed in the announcements of your bulletin today that our youth group is gearing up for Catacombs. That was one of my favorite events when I was a youth worker here. For the uninitiated, it is a whole church game of hide and seek where we turn off all the lights and bathe ourselves in darkness. For a while, we didn't even let kids who had light-up watches keep them while they played the game. And when you're a youth pastor who enjoys slightly torturing students, you mess with them a little bit at this event. One year we hid around corners with air horns. One year we discovered that the wireless microphones in the sanctuary have quite a good range to them, and so I sat in the studio down the hall and watched the live stream cameras and whispered the kids' names to them through the sound system. We even once had a friend go get a vintage wedding dress and zombie makeup and pretend to be the ghost of a bride left at the altar.

While it is really fun to mess with kids, the truth is, we think that we leave behind our fear of the dark when we stop being little children. But we don't. And to spoil the whole sermon up front, to tell you the ending before we get there, what is the call of the church? Don't be afraid of the dark. There's this threefold movement in the story that we read today that I think outlines the call of the church really well, circling around Peter and John.

The first movement in this story is they experience darkness. This part actually happens before the story we read today.

Peter and John are walking into a temple and come across a blind cripple who needs help, and so they heal him. They use this faith of theirs to speak in Jesus' name, and they heal the man, allowing him to walk, and then they preach about what Jesus had done through them. The religious leaders of their day, the Council, see this as a threat. They say, "To keep from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." They called them, they ordered them not to speak at all in the name of Jesus. It's a threat. Not a particularly well-veiled one either. The implication is, "If you keep doing what you're doing, we'll kill you." The powers that be said, "We will do to you what we just did to that guy you were following." It's not an empty threat at all. How would you respond to such threats? There are a lot of different responses to a threat like this. I don't think I would have chosen what this newly forming church decides to do because after they experience the darkness, they confront the darkness.

Peter and John leave the Council, and they find the rest of the believers,this newly forming church, and after all that had happened to them, they tell them what's been going on. Some impressive things start to happen. For starters, they're not afraid to name the darkness. They'll point right at it, in fact. First, they use scripture, looking at Psalms to see how kings are going to do their king thing. Kings, it turned out, tend to work their own purposes, whether that's in line with the

Kingdom of God or not. Thank goodness we've got that under control in our day…

But then these guys are bold enough to name-drop in a place and at a time where name-dropping is no good. They bring up Herod, they bring up Pilate, these guys who just killed Jesus. Yeah, we'll talk about them. Bring it on. Why not? And then they have the audacity to pray for more boldness. Scripture says, "And now, Lord, look at their threats and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness." Apparently, they feel like they haven't been bold enough yet.

After healing a guy in Jesus' name and then preaching about Jesus to a hostile crowd, and then being dragged before the religious leaders, and then staring those leaders down and saying, "No, we won't stop." And then name-dropping the kings who just killed their savior, who have just freshly threatened to do the same thing to them. After all that, they decided they're not bold enough yet. The early church is not afraid of the dark. But it's what they do next that is so very impressive.

The Bible, in its original form, didn't have verse numbers and chapters to split things up. It would've rolled right from one story into the next. And so after that prayer, these disciples respond with light. Think about all the things they didn't do to respond. They did not send a strongly worded tweet to Herod. They did not rush to Pilate's fortress waving signs they made

out of pizza boxes, more interested in making noise than affecting change. They didn't turn on Fox News or CNN to participate in rage bait. They didn't do any of those things because they know those things don't work. Responding to darkness with more darkness doesn't work. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. said it this way, "Returning hate for hate only multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

So the early church responds to all this darkness around them with light. They meet the needs of all those around them. No one has any needs anymore, it says. The Greek under all of this suggests that everyone still had possessions, but they didn't claim them as their own. For instance, today I have an umbrella, but if you're going to walk out there in the rain by yourself, let me help you. Take what's mine. The text says that in this church of thousands, there was not a needy person among them. That's impressive.

They also get together and they tell testimonies. They get together and tell stories about the light that they were experiencing. It says they gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They talked about all the places that were dead in their lives but had come to life. They talked about all the places that they had lost hope but found it again. They talked and shared their stories. Maybe even more

important, they listened to one another's stories, and in so doing, shared the light.

And then they were great encouragers. Barnabas is a neat character in this story of the early church. Apparently, he was so encouraging, he was so uplifting, he was so dedicated to seeing others succeed, that he got a new nickname because of it. He's sort of like the biblical Ted Lasso. We need more Barnabas…es…Barnabi? We need more people encouraging other people in our lives. Folks who are ready to point at the light rather than contribute deeper darkness to a sky already devoid of stars.

That's it. That's the call of the church. To experience darkness, to confront darkness, and to respond with light. How is it that we can lean into this? First, we need to be open to experiencing darkness.

A long while ago, I did my internship for seminary at House of Manna Church in Homewood. One night, I was leading their youth Bible study, and a young man of about 20 burst through the door, panting and out of breath and yelling that some guys were following him with guns. So the pastor took the young man downstairs. I took the youth group upstairs. Clearly, I was terrified, nervous, trying my best to stay calm and get the flop sweat under control. I guess I wasn't doing so well at projecting calm because one of the youth group kids looked at

me and said, "Why are you so scared? This happens to us every day, bro."

I was so inexperienced at that kind of darkness, but for them, it was an everyday occurrence. Our privilege can convince us that we can isolate from darkness. We think we can build lives where we never have to experience any darkness at all, that we never have to experience violence, we never have to experience lack, we never have to experience prejudice, we never have to experience despair. We barely have to experience discomfort. And some of us have spent our whole lives making sure that's true, myself included. But here's the trick, church. It's actually bad for us. It keeps us away from our calling. If we're going to be the church as God has called us to be, we need to experience the darkness the same way that Peter and John did. We need to put ourselves in places where our witness could be a danger to us. I know it's scary, but let's not be afraid of the dark.

Once we've experienced the darkness, we ought to confront the darkness. We ought to speak out where we need to, regardless of the politics of our days, because so much of what used to be no-brainers in our faith has been caught up by our broken, partisan political game. And so hear me, Church. What I'm about to say, it's not left or right, or Democrat or Republican. It's just what I see when I read this.

It was announced this week that our government is going to execute someone by way of a firing squad and intends to live stream the event to the world. In our scriptures, Jesus reminds us that no matter how powerful the state is, public execution is not the way of the kingdom. Jesus even had some experience with this. Jesus said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. He said that it's the peacemakers who are blessed. Jesus says we ought to love our enemies, not live stream their death. That's a darkness that the church ought to confront, no matter who we voted for.

Or maybe we could think about immigration. There are, to this day, families who are being separated from each other simply because they don't have the proper documents to be in this country. For not having the right paperwork filled out, mothers and daughters are separated, never to know where the other went. This book tells us to look out for the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. In fact, it says it a lot. And yes, there are rules, and the rules need to be followed, but ask ourselves, are we responding in a way that's in line with the light of the gospel? Is the way we're handling immigration in this country good news for everyone, or just good news for the powerful? That's a darkness the church ought to confront, no matter who we voted for.

Or maybe we could think about race and reconciliation. I had the honor and privilege of sharing a world communion service last Sunday afternoon with the Pittsburgh chapter of the

National Black Presbyterian Caucus. And while we may have convinced ourselves that racial harm was what happened around here in the '50s and '60s, my brothers and sisters were telling me a story that it's still happening to them. They're still facing discrimination. They're still facing hate. They're still facing prejudice. They're still in pain. This book tells us that when one part of the body suffers, all suffer with it. And if our brothers and sisters are telling us their story, their testimony, we ought to be listening. We ought to be responding as best as we can. That's a darkness that the church can and should confront.

There are a thousand responses of the world to things like this. I can already hear emails being composed in my head. "Stop being so political." "What are you saying you hate America?" "What difference does any of this mean?" Truth is, all those responses sound like darkness to me. Here's the trick, church. I don't know about you, but I am tired of being afraid of the dark. The church runs from its calling when we leave it up to politicians and news anchors to confront the darkness for us. No wonder we get labeled as irrelevant. We need to confront the darkness, but we can't do so with more darkness. Neither the church nor MLK would allow us to believe it works to just sit here in this safe sanctuary and bellyache.

We need to respond with light. Maybe we could start to share our testimonies. Where are the stories in this place where

you've seen God's light? Have you seen good news show up in the midst of all the bad news? Have you seen the darkness shrink because of someone else's kindness? Have you witnessed the goodness of God, either in here or outside these walls? Then tell us. Make space for the stories of others. Make time to ensure that we can hear the stories of others. Come by the pastors' office. Let one of us know where you've seen God at work in the world. We'd love to hear it. Or maybe we could ask, who is it that has needs right now? Dr. Galbreath famously started Westminster with a question, "Where here do people hurt?" Wonder how we would answer this question today. Are there any in here in this community within our own walls that have needs that we could meet? More so, are there any out there, anyone that we could provide for if we simply realize that nothing we own is ours, but it all belongs to God? Where do people hurt here? It's not just our legacy from our founding pastor. That's a question at the heart of the call of the church.

And who is it, by the way, that we could encourage? I've been traveling all week, and tales of woe from my travels will be an illustration in their own sermon someday, I can assure you. But I spent way more time than I should have sitting at gates looking at social media on my phone, and here's the takeaway from that. We have far too few Barnabas. Barnabi, Barnet, whatever. Still, we don't have enough folks who are encouraging in the world. It seems that our culture is more

interested in tearing down than it is in building up. It seems that we've convinced ourselves that the only way for anyone to get ahead is to make sure that someone gets left behind. It seems we're more interested in the zero-sum game that has no winners. Church, we're called to be different, called to lift other people up even when the whole world is putting them down. We're called to speak words of kindness into the world even when your flight is delayed again and the gate agent's being mean about it. Okay, I couldn't help it. Sorry. That one had to slip in.

Church, I don't know about you, but I am done being afraid of the dark. There's nothing in there that can hurt us anyway with Christ at our back. So let us lean into the call of the church and let us be a beacon of light in dark places.

My friends, may you not be afraid of the dark. May you realize that when God has called you to experience the darkness, it's not a failing, it's a moment of solidarity. May you have the courage to confront the darkness, no matter what the rest of the crowd is doing. May you always respond to darkness with light, adding more stars to a night sky devoid of light. May we live into the call and vocation of the church. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.



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