

St. Andrew's UMC
December 14th, 2008
John 1:6-8; 19-28
"Make Straight The Way Of The Lord"

When my son, Daniel, was about three years old, we decided to go camping at Pinnacles National Monument, located south of Hollister. I wished it was more than a day, but "she-who-must-be-obeyed" was not much into sleeping in a cramped tent. On a hindsight, I should have been grateful that she even came along to do exactly the same thing she did at home, only in the wilderness, without the benefit of hot water and the comfort of the modern toilet: she took care of the baby, cooked, did the dishes, and looked after the other baby, usually referred to as a hubby. I think she had reached the maximum tolerance level of "roughing it," and one day declared that, from now on, it would be either hotels or motels, as far as camping was concerned.

Anyway, at the camp site, we were the only ones who camped there, and it was really nice to own that wonderful piece of wilderness all to ourselves. That night, after a long delay, I eventually got up to answer the call of nature. When I got out of the tent, suddenly, the heaven full of bright stars were pushed in my face.

I was startled, because I had forgotten that there were so many stars in the sky! The city lights pollute the night sky, and we cosmopolitans gradually forget what the heaven is supposed to look like at night.

Forgetting why I got up in the first place, I crawled back into the tent, and grabbed my glasses. I woke up my son to show him the stars. She-who-must-be-obeyed also woke up, and all three of us stood outside, gazing up the night sky. But I cannot forget the reaction from my son, when he looked up the night sky full of stars for the first time in his earthly life: he shouted out, "Ya, Jota!"

Daniel spoke only Korean until he entered the kindergarten, and that exclamation was roughly translated, "Wow, *good!*"

That reminded me of the verse in Genesis 1:

³ “And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

That was the moment God’s creation was recognized and appreciated by a three-year old child.

As we grow older in the secular world, we tend to lose the sense of wonder—the wonder that only the pure heart could sense and appreciate of God’s creation. As we heighten our awareness to the materialistic attraction and the worldly distraction, our sensitivities to the wonders of life become dull. As we lose our touch of the simple, but fundamental, things of life, we begin to take things for granted, and boast in our hearts what we have achieved by ourselves. The dimension of thankfulness seems to have diminished from our society.

How wonderful it was to hear that spontaneous affirmation of God’s creation from the mouth of a three-year old child! If God was listening, God would have appreciated that acclamation from a toddler for God’s handiwork.

To the three-year old, the light was light, literally, and the stars in the night sky dazzled him. But to Philipp Nicolai who wrote the Lutheran hymn which is known as the United Methodist Hymn #247, translated into English, “O Morning Star, how fair and bright thou beamest forth in truth and light, O sovereign meek and lowly!”, the light was the metaphor of Jesus who came into this world, and his light dazzled his soul.

And the light dazzled the writer of John’s Gospel, too. He used the light as the metaphor of the Messiah:

"1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

According to the Christian story, the Messiah did not just happen to drop in our neighborhood. God had those prophets prophesy of his

arrival. God had dispatched a messenger to herald the coming of the Messiah. From what we gather, we find that God did not do this on a whim, but God had planned and prepared for the appearance of the Messiah.

After the event of the cross, the early Christians searched the scriptures. They had to make sure that what they have witnessed had a meaning. If the event of Jesus was what they believed to be, or at least suspected it to be, the scriptures had to have the answers to their questions about the Messiah. And they found that there were plenty of headsupps and blurbs in the scriptures. And to those searching eyes, even the messenger was prophesied in the Book of Isaiah.

When this particular messenger appeared and started shouting in the wilderness, as the scripture said he would, he did not look impressive at all. He was dressed in a rather rough and peculiar fashion, and subsisted on a diet rich in sugar and protein, and low in vegetable fiber. His manner was repugnant, for he treated everyone like a sinner and told everyone to repent. If anyone expected to see a polished orator, or a royal messenger, he or she would have missed him entirely.

It required a certain perspective, in order to receive the messenger. It is not unlike having the perspective of a three-year old to appreciate and shout out, "Wow, *good!*"

What I mean is: when the bike messenger showed up all sweaty in the wet T-shirt and cut-out jeans, with tattoos and metallic piercings, and hand-delivered the legal document to you, did his appearance and smell affect the legality, or alter the content, of the document? If the messenger had a hamburger with a slice of raw onion, instead of the chicken salad for his lunch earlier, would it have changed the way you understood the meaning of the legal document? What the messenger's wardrobe consisted of, or what diet the messenger adhered to, should not be of the factor to hearing the message of the messenger, that's what I am saying.

You see the brown envelope, and you are able to identify it and appreciate its worth as *is*. You see the stars in the night sky, and you

are able to identify them and appreciate them as they are—just like a three-year old would. Now you know why Jesus said in Luke 18:17:

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

Later Jesus talks precisely about the point of identifying the messenger, in Matthew 11:

“As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses.”

If one was seeking the messenger dressed in soft raiment, he would not expect to find him in the wilderness. He would just gloss over someone who was dressed in a camel hair tunic. Just as the city lights obscure the stars in the heavens, our perspectives trained by the worldly expectations fail to perceive the true light. If we are trained to look for a particular thing, we won't likely focus on something outside our curriculum.

Only days ago, the nation was jolted by the outrageous revelation: the governor of Illinois intimated to the interested people that the name of the game was “pay to play.” If one wanted to be appointed to the senator seat vacated by the president-elect Obama, one was advised to pack a suitcase full of dollars.

Even the son of the well known civil rights leader was seen vehemently denying any allegation. I hope it would not turn out to be the case of “Methinks thou doth protest too much.” That would be one of the saddest days if that allegation turned out to be true.

Those who want to see it as true would receive the account of the story. Those who want it to be false would reject the allegation. But no one outside the immediate circle knows anything yet for sure. So the question remains: Is the story reported as is, or is it just another media hype, filtered and spun as usual? Does the story mean different things to the TV viewers, depending on which TV channel

they watched? Does it mean different things, depending on which side of the political spectrum the reader belongs? Maybe, the city lights are too strong to see the star lights?

If light can symbolize what is good and what is righteous, its counterpart, darkness, can also symbolize what is corrupt, greedy, unjust, and bigoted. If some one had to adjust his expectations according to the rules of the worldly games, then his vision would have darkened, and would not have realized that the city lights had obscured the brilliance of the stars in the heaven. That person would not have realized that the way things are is actually polluting the night sky.

John the Baptist came to testify to this light that shined into the darkness of this world. We are called to prepare the way for this light. What could that message mean today? Can the message be received *as is* today? Or, are there too much hype, spin, training, and expectations of the way things are in this world for us to perceive anything as is?

Preparing the way of the Lord would require from us the behavior modification. But that won't happen, unless we begin to see the different light: what makes the behavior modification possible is the restoration of the perspective that would allow us to see things as they are. Then the star light will look like star light, and the city lights will look like city lights.

Again, Jesus asked the pertinent question to this problem of perspective:

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye (Matt. 7:3)?”

May God restore our vision, and let us see things as they are.