

**The Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2020**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

**In the Darkness, a Witness to the Light**

John 1:6–8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*


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The text for this Gaudete—“Rejoice!”—Sunday: **There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light** (vv 6–8).

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Just as Advent comes before Christmas, so John the Baptizer comes before Jesus. If we know who John is, we’ll also know who Jesus is. So who is John? That’s what the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were trying to figure out. They sent messengers to ask him. John is the voice crying in the wilderness, as we heard last Sunday. He prepares the way of the Lord. He is the forerunner. He is the herald announcing God’s arrival. Now, this Sunday, we hear that **he came to bear witness about the light** (vv 7, 8). Who is John? **He was not the light**, but He was witness to the light. And this light is the reason for our joy today.

## 3.

**The light shines in the darkness** (Jn 1:5). Light is opposed to darkness. When God created the heavens and the earth, we’re told that **darkness was over the face of the deep**. Then **God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light** (Gen 1:2, 3). Creation foreshadows redemption. The Gospel of John begins with creation but finds in it a deeper darkness—the darkness that came because of the fall into sin. There are several ways to think of this spiritual darkness. First, there’s the darkness of sin itself. Wicked deeds take place in the dark and are kept hidden in the dark. Second, there’s the danger of walking in darkness. The Twenty-third Psalm describes life as a journey **through the valley of the shadow (darkness) of death** (Ps 23:4). Today we’re going to focus instead on a third way: there’s the uncertainty and fear created by darkness, what we might call the darkness of time.

Adam and Eve faced this darkness after their sin: a future of pain in having and raising children, a future of strife and sorrow in marriage and relationships, a future of frustrating sweat and toil in work. They were driven east from the garden of Eden into

an unknown land and an uncertain future. Eden had been the home of peace, certainty, and joy; east of Eden was completely different. Behind them stood the cherubim and a flaming sword; in front of them was darkness.

We also experience time like this. We sometimes say the future is dark. We don't just mean these long, dark days of winter, nor is it only the darkness of sin and death that lie ahead. The future is dark means that it is unknown, unpredictable, and uncertain. We always live in this type of darkness, but it seems even more pronounced this year. It's like the difference between seeing a black bear in the distance versus staring one in the face. In the first case, you get a rush of adrenaline and plan your next move. In the second case, well, who knows? God help you!

For many of you, it feels like being face-to-face with a black bear right now. The unknowns in life are bigger and closer, and you have no idea what to do about them. You may be thinking: When will the vaccine be available? Will it be effective? Will it be safe? What about Christmas plans? Christmas services? Will it be wise to gather with family? As a church? Will it be socially acceptable? What about the economy? Will I still have my job after the holidays? Will we ever go back to school full-time? And who even knows? It's like the blind leading the blind. The future is dark, indeed.

## 2.

But into this uncertainty, God sent a man, **whose name was John** (v 6). John bears witness to the light. He's like the man standing on top of the mountain who sees the first ray of sunlight. Picture him on Cadillac Mountain in the heart of Maine's Acadia National Park where the first light of day falls in the United States. Through John, we know that **the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world** (Jn 1:9). This light is better than a match that blazes for a moment and then dies. It's brighter than a flickering candle. It's superior even to the sun, because it needs no power source, no fuel, no matter or energy beyond itself. It has no beginning, and it will never burn out. *This* light is eternal. He is the one through whom all things were made. He is one with the Father from all eternity. "Light of Light," as we say in the Creed.

So it's as if John appears from that eastern mountain. Having glimpsed the first light beyond the horizon, he runs to tell us about it. "The day dawns!" he cries. "The light—it's already shining! Even the darkness is not dark to Him!" John sees that the future filled not with darkness but light. What lies ahead is brighter than what we see now, yes, brighter than the golden ages of the past. The darkness is brief and passing.

This light illuminates creation by speaking what He hears from the Father. He reveals the depths of sin and death, but He also reveals the gracious will of God. Still, this

revelation didn't sit well with the people of His day. They preferred the darkness—more than just plain darkness, they preferred the outer darkness, eternal darkness, perpetual uncertainty. They closed their eyes and ears to the glorious light. They snuffed Him out with a cross. Darkness was over the face of the earth once again, like a thick cloud, like a stone rolled over the mouth of a cave. Put God to death, turn your back on Him, shut Him out and that's how dark it gets.

But remember John. He was not the light. He came as a witness. And even though he was beheaded, he still speaks. He continues to bear witness. He proclaims the light. "Look for this One," He says, "for **He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I'm not worthy to untie**" (Jn 1:27). John is the lesser light. In Him we see rays reflected from the Greater Light. The light eternal didn't remain in the darkness of death. "**The darkness has not overcome it**" (Jn 1:5). The cross and grave have not dimmed the brightness of this light; they've made it brighter still. The light is risen! He shone forth from the grave to bring life and light to all creation. Forever transfigured,

"This is the strong and joyful Light  
That shall outlast the passing night,"  
and  
"This is our future, bright and fair!  
This those who follow Him shall share!"

### 1.

Even now the light that pierces the darkness is shining. What is dark to us is not dark to Him. Though we cannot see the future, though we don't know what tomorrow will bring, much less Christmas or the new year, we know Him, we see Him by faith, and we find joy in what He brings. He brings light and life for us now until the Day comes when we have light and life with Him forever. The Book of Revelation describes the new heavens and the new earth like this: there is no sun or moon, for the Lamb is the light in the city of God (Rev 21:23). He comes into our dark and uncertain times to give us Himself, to be the light of the world, and to be your light. By faith, we see the crucified and risen Lord who has destroyed the darkness of death for us and who promises us a future brighter than anything we can imagine. So bright is this future that we can endure the darkness ahead. Whatever else may come, however worse it may get, the light has come, and the light will come again. You can almost see it! Every candle in a window, every bulb on the tree, every strand in the neighborhood points to Him.

He is the answer to our prayers now, even as He will answer our prayers fully and finally when He comes in glory and brightness. He lightens the darkness of our hearts by His gracious visitation. Yes, by lifting the weight of sin from our shoulders and by taking death off our backs, but also by lightening the burden of the future. The light

shines on us now with grace and mercy. Yes, it may feel like we are groping our way forward, but it isn't the blind leading the blind any longer. We're led by the One who created the light and the eye to see it. We're led by the One who brought the blind out of darkness. If the future is dark to us, it's not dark to Him, and for us it's like the darkness of a tunnel. We pass through it, but all the while He fixes our eyes on the light at the tunnel's end, at the brightness of the new day on the other side. The light will see us through! The darkness cannot end our joy!

This is the witness of John:

REJOICE, FOR EVEN NOW  
THE LIGHT THAT PIERCES THE DARKNESS IS SHINING.

As Zechariah, seeing the light reflected in John's birth, said, **"You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise—the sunrise!—shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Lk 1:76–79).**

Rejoice, rejoice! *Gaudete, gaudete!* *Christus est natus ex Maria virgine, gaudete!* Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born of the virgin Mary, rejoice! It is now the time of grace that we have desired; let us sing songs of joy, let us give devotion. . . . From where light rises salvation is found. Therefore, let our congregation now sing in brightness; let it praise the Lord: Greetings to our King.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Gaudete is the Latin name for the Third Sunday in Advent based on a text used during the service. It means "rejoice"! There is also a medieval Christmas carol of the same name.*

*Credit for portions of the sermon—the ideas as well as particular words and phrases—is given to the Rev. Peter Nafzger based on an article he wrote for the Craft of Preaching web site in December 2020:*

<https://www.1517.org/articles/gospel-john-16-8-19-20-advent-3-series-b>.