

## “A Witness to the Light”

Jack and Della are walking in the deep dark of a locked cemetery. They shouldn't be there, this white preacher's son and this black preacher's daughter, but circumstances bring them together. In Marilynne Robinson's new novel, Jack, Jack and Della spend a night there, and in middle of the night Della poses to Jack a 'conundrum', a difficult or confusing question.

She asks Jack, “Have you ever noticed that if you strike a match in a dark room, it seems to spread quite a lot of light. But if you strike one in a room that is already light, it seems to make no difference.

“...I just think it's interesting. If you add light to light, there should be more of it. As much more as if you add light to darkness. But I don't think there is.” “A conundrum”, Jack responds.

You can try it at home. I did. Sermon research. I think she's right. I suppose there is a perfectly good scientific explanation, but it seems odd, if you think on it for a while. Be sure you don't think about it too long while you are holding the match. Fire burns.

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” Another conundrum, less confusing, this one. John, the gospel writer, is writing about

John, not himself, but a different man named John. In the other gospels we learn that this man John, not the gospel writer, is the one who baptized Jesus, so we call him John the Baptist. But not John of the Gospel According to John. No, we just get 'There was a man sent from God whose name was John.'

The Bible is a story about ordinary human beings, like you and me, who are sent from God, and we have a name. The Bible is about you and me, in a way, you see. That's the point of having a Bible, for us to not only find and see God, but just much to find and see ourselves, to understand how we relate to God.

God sent you here too. You are not a random choice of your parents. You are certainly not a mistake. You are a woman, a man, sent from God. The words John, the gospel writer uses, 'sent from', is the idea of coming on a mission designed by God. The challenge of life is to discover that mission, and to then accept it and live into it as best we can, living out our mission in a way that shines the light not on ourselves but reflects the light that is Jesus.

John, the one we otherwise know as the Baptist, 'came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.' And because he was faithful to his call, because he came to understand his role in the kingdom

of God so perfectly, there is not a person who believes who does not in some way owe that belief in the Light of the World to this John the Witness.

John had perfect clarity on his calling. He may not have had it at first. Maybe when people first started following him into the desert he was taken with the adulation and praise of others. Maybe. Maybe he was an introvert and he really didn't like all of the attention. But either way, by the time he was in thirty-ish he got it: his purpose in life was to testify, to reflect the light of Jesus so that people, when they looked at him, would follow his finger and see that he was pointing not at himself, but at Jesus.

John had perfect clarity about the fact that, "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." As John Stendahl writes, "We are not, any nor all of us, the Messiah. That position has already been filled....We already have a Messiah and he ain't us." If we can get this into our thick skulls, then life becomes a lot more satisfying. Our lives are not about us. Really, "It's not about me" is something we need to keep reminding ourselves as Christians.

We don't need to save people, and indeed we cannot. That is God's work, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not the work of a man called John, and not your work either. But, it is your work to witness to the light by pointing to Jesus. You might

call it evangelism, and that's what it is, testifying to the Good News. Sadly, our politics has ruined the word 'evangelicals' into a political subgroup, and I don't know whether to blame Christians or the news media for that. What I mean by 'evangelical' though is not a subset of political beliefs, but the original meaning, a someone who tells the Good News about Jesus Christ; someone who strikes a light in a dark room so that people see Jesus. And the darker the room, the brighter that light of the world will shine, you see?

That's where we are sent. Like this John, who wasn't, as you see, dressed for success, unless the point was that people should not notice him but notice the one to whom he points: Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was so dedicated to telling that one truth that it cost him everything else. No romance that we know of; no money; ate bugs and honey, and eventually was decapitated by a maniacal ruler.

Before he died, while he was in prison awaiting death, he wanted to know one thing only: "Jesus, are you really the one?" And Jesus sends word back, "Go tell John, the lame will walk, the blind will see, the captive hearts will be set free, the broken hearts will be healed, because through you, a man called John, they saw the light."

The religious authorities of John's day couldn't figure out who he was. He was famous, yet he didn't act like a famous person. So they came questioning him, and John was very clear, "I am not the Messiah." Friends, you don't need to be the Messiah either, all you need to do is point your friends, your family, your co-workers to Jesus.

They asked John, "Who are you?", and John told them that he was a voice, a voice calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'

That is our call too, to go into the wilderness places, the hearts that are wandering in the desert, so lost that they fear they will not survive. You go and make straight the way the way of the Lord into their lives.

You go to them because, as John says, "Among you stands one you do not know." People still don't know Jesus, not the Jesus that is the Light. That is why they are so lost. They can't find the match to light. It is just too dark, in their grief, in their isolation, in their desolation, in their shame, in their anger.

Like the Black preachers ask, "Can I get a witness?" Jesus wants to know if you will go strike a match to bring light to them, to show the lost the one they do not know, show them that Jesus is the one standing right in the room with them.

Show them the rest of the picture, show them that the one who light you are sent to reflect is the Messiah, the Savior of the World.

Now, just how are you going to do that? You help build homes for the homeless. You provide food for hungry stomachs. You put warm coats on cold bodies. These are the ways that you light a match which reveals the light of Jesus. You make straight the pathway for Jesus to enter someone's heart every time you paint a wall or prepare a meal or pay for a coat.

And this word which is on my heart today as Christmas approaches. How can you shine Jesus to your children, your co-workers, your friends, your spouses? Love them unconditionally. That is how Jesus loves you. God sent the light when it was dark, as we will talk about Christmas Eve, because God loves you just as you are. Now your call is to reflect the light in the same way: unconditionally.

Is there any more way to shine brilliantly a light into someone's heart than by a parent saying to a child that you accept their sexuality, that you accept their past, that you accept the future they have chosen. You are not God, you are not the Messiah. If you believe that "Just As I Am" is how God loves them, isn't that how you should love them too? Let them see the light of the world shine through you this Advent season. Love them unconditionally.

A final word from John Calvin: John is to Jesus as is the dawning of the day to the sun. You know we have some exceptionally gifted photographers in this church. Doris is our unofficial church photographer. And so many of you share profound and fun pictures on Facebook and Instagram. But this morning I am thinking of a woman named Kristin, sent by God to be a witness to the dawn.

She gets up before the dawn to give us sleepy-heads a picture of the dawn that points to the rising of the sun. The dawning of the day she captures is a daily devotional. What makes the dawn so spectacular though? The sun that we cannot yet see, yet the picture of the dawn assures us the sun is rising.

This is your life. To strike a match in the darkness where the light will shine most brightly. To reflect the dawning light as do the sky and the water each day, as a reminder that the light of the world is rising, that love is being born.