'"We'll Leave The Light On For You"

A Sermon by Lay Leader Ben Roe
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Warren United Methodist Church
1630 E. 14th at Gilpin, Denver, CO 80218

"We'll Leave The Light On For You" You may remember that commercial for Motel 6 by Tom Bodett, the one that ended "We'll leave the light on for you." That famous tag-line, "We'll leave the light on for you" was an ad-lib addition that captured the sense of warm hospitality that any good hotel/motel owner strives for. Alaskan Tom Bodett became a spokesman for Motel 6 through these award-winning ads, which communicate a simple, down-home spirit. They have become one of the longest-running ad campaigns in history. And I think that kind of warm hospitality and welcome is what the Gospel is about.

I think we can get some helpful insights about hospitality from the 4 scripture lessons appointed for this third Sunday after Epiphany. (Epiphany, you remember, is the traditional celebration of the arrival of the Magi or Wise Men, who followed a strange light in the sky to where Jesus had been born.) The fourth lesson is Psalm 27, which I'll talk about later.

I have 3 main points today: I. We are a welcoming, hospitable community because God has called us. II. We are a welcoming, hospitable community because we have been touched by the Cross. III. And we are a welcoming, hospitable community because we have responded to the call to discipleship.

I. We are a welcoming, hospitable community because God has called us, has welcomed us into it.

The prophetic poem in this Isaiah 9 passage is seen sometimes as a proclamation for the ascent of a king, probably Hezekiah, or more likely perhaps the birth of a kingly son. The prophetic word comes during yet another time of occupation, when things were very dark for the people of Israel. Yet, this passage gives hope, in that the light has already dawned, God has already brought joy and taken the burden of oppression from their hearts, if not from their land. Isaiah sees this happening in the region of Galilee, where there was a mix of folks, and remembering the victory of Gideon at a place called Midean.
Remember that the Bible is a collection of stories and interpretations and meanings about these stories of people who wrestled with life, with each other, and with God in very difficult times. It is a collection of stories about a people called together by God, and who responded to that call in a more or less faithful way, a people who were at times overrun by stronger tribes, and much stronger empires. The prophets like Isaiah weren't necessarily gifted with foresight, but they were astute observers of the follies of the people around them, and sensitive to God's call to greater faithfulness.

For Christians, this prophetic saying has become fulfilled in Jesus, as Matthew's passage proclaims. Light transforms darkness as this anointed one comes. The oppression of the past is lifted. A new age has dawned. The sign of God's deliverance is the birth of a new child. That is why this passage is so commonly heard around Christmas.

The passage talks about how this has happened, and scholars date the events around the year 734, before the time of Jesus. But we who read it today, can see in it a much greater symbolism: we can recognize that God's light has dawned upon us, and those of us who live in a land of deep darkness can experience light.

That is the way it can be in our life as a community. Perhaps your darkness is personal, perhaps you are sensitive to the darkness in our culture or in our world. The witness of Isaiah is that God's light is shining into these places of darkness.

We can offer hospitality and welcome because we have been called into community by the light of God. The African song, Siya Humba, speaks of this kind of joy: We are walking in the Light of God.

II. We are a welcoming, hospitable community because we have been touched by the Cross, that is, the power of a steadfast love which would even go to death for God's truth.

In I Cor. 1, Paul is talking about the divisions which the Corinthian church is experiencing. He challenges the people to look at what they're doing: their divisions are due to loyalties to particular people, not to Christ. And these false loyalties prevent the light of Christ from shining forth.
We attended a speech last night in Longmont, where Rev. Bill Johnson gave some suggestions for overcoming the divisions in the church regarding homosexuality. Bill was the first openly gay person to be ordained in any of the major denominations, the United Church of Christ, in 1972. He suggested that the issue isn't homosexuality at all, but prejudice, fear, and misunderstanding. He suggested that some folks seem to worship the words of the Bible rather than the God of the Bible. He spoke of how he had been able to claim God's unconditional love for him and how he had been able to share that love with others. Bill's four main points apply not just to the prejudice against same-gender loving: they apply to any faithful Christian community who wants to be welcoming:

1. Have the courage to openly affirm what we believe and honestly struggle with the implications of what we believe;
2. examine the origins and expressions of our own prejudice (whether it be our anti-gay prejudice, our racism, our sexism, our prejudice about street people...);
3. get the facts, face our fears, commit to meet those who have been cut off by our fears, and affirm our kinship with them;
4. be honest about all barriers that prevent us from opening our hearts to those who are different.

That sounds like a pretty tall order, doesn't it? But the gift of the Gospel is that we don't have to do it alone.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that God has brought them together through the transforming power of God's love: the cross is the uniting power. We can realize this, too, in our lives as a community of faith: that God has brought us together, that we can face the fears we may have about one another and begin listening to each other in love.

We say in our mission statement that we are "a congregation providing a sanctuary of healing and a source of education and empowerment. We seek to reflect God's love and justice as revealed in Jesus Christ by acting with compassion and grace. Our diverse community strives to be open and welcoming to all persons including those of any race, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability or other differences in social and cultural status. The love of God encompasses all creation."

We will be together as we live out our faith journeys.

III. We are a welcoming church, a place of hospitality because we have
responded to the call to discipleship.

In chapter 4, Matthew quotes Isaiah 9's prophetic poem. But this time, there's a whole new spin on that passage, because Matthew sees Isaiah referring to Jesus as the anointed one referred to in the prophecy. In this chapter, Jesus begins his ministry by calling his first disciples. A new light has dawned upon the people and their old oppression will come to an end. But this new day is surprising and not what people expected. Judas kept thinking Jesus was a political and military leader. He missed the point.

You remember that Matthew is not a biographer in our modern sense, and he's not just a story-teller. But he is a theologian who puts his stories in a particular order, and in a particular way to emphasize a point of view. In this case, he puts Jesus in Galilee at the start of his ministry to emphasize that the good news Jesus brings is for all people. Galilee in Matthew's time (and in Isaiah's, apparently) was a place of a mix of Jewish and Gentile (non-Jewish) peoples.

For the religious people of Jesus' day, Jesus calls some unusual people: common fisherfolk, tax collectors, and others. There's no record of the conversation between Jesus and those he called in this passage. The power and authority of his person were compelling, and they dropped what they were doing and followed! In the rest of the Gospel, we read of who else he called. The most religious people of Jesus' day would have been uncomfortable with some of those Jesus chose for his disciples. We have the banner on the 14th Street side of our church that says, "Welcoming All in a Community of Diversity." Can we have faith enough to recognize the light of Christ in those who worship with us, including the strangers who make us uncomfortable?

Conclusion

There is a famous old Hasidic tale that talks about darkness and light:

A Rabbi asked his students, "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?"

One of his students suggested, "When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?"
"No," was the answer from the Rabbi.

"Is it when one man can distinguish between a fig tree and a grape vine?" asked a second student.

"No," the Rabbi said.

"Please tell us the answer, then," said the students.

"It is, then," said the wise teacher, "when you can look into the face of a stranger and you have enough light within you to recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Up until then it is night, and darkness is still with us."

"The future is blowing wildly in our faces, sometimes brightening the air and sometimes blinding us." said DH Lawrence. That's our situation. We're faced with a new future that sometimes terrifies us, upsets our sense of order and stability. But God is out there in this future calling us to follow faithfully.

I don't need to remind you of the saying over the door at the front of our sanctuary: "There is not enough darkness in all the world to put out the light of one small candle." That is a part of our creed here at Warren: we don't curse the darkness but offer what light we can.

Psalm 27 says, "Arise, Shine, for your light has come!" God's light has come into your life. Let it light up every dark corner and feel its warmth. Arise, shine, for your darkness has been overcome by God's love. Arise, shine, for you have been welcomed, enlightened, forgiven, and made new. Arise, shine, for you are God's loving, welcoming people.

So we can say, "We'll leave the light on for ya," but what we can say as a Christian community
is that we'll be at the door to welcome you, invite you in, get to know you, and look forward to walking the path of life with you.

John Fox, in his book *Finding What You Didn't Lose* describes what happens When Someone Deeply Listens To You:

"When someone deeply listens to you it is like holding out a dented cup you've had since childhood and watching it fill up with cold, fresh water. When it balances on top of the brim, you are understood. When it overflows and touches your skin, you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you, the room where you stay starts a new life and the place where you wrote your first poem begins to glow in your mind's eye. It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you, your bare feet are on the earth and a beloved land that seemed distant is now at home within you."

Perhaps we can be this for each other.

How can I become light to anyone else, you might ask? As Paul Tillich once said, "Accept the fact that you are accepted." You are accepted just as you are. The church is a community of people who respond to God's call to discipleship, who accept God's love and light, and who reach out to all the world in service. Let us walk together this walk of faith. Amen.