***A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 15, 2023

Texts: Isaiah 49:1-7 and John 1:29-42

One evening before the days of electric streetlights, young Robert Louis Stevenson was watching a lamplighter light the gas lamps along his street. Moving from one to the other, the lamplighter extended his small flame to the lamp until it blazed forth to illumine another portion of the street. Along the darkened corridor there was suddenly light – and light – and light – along the way. As young Stevenson was watching, a man stopped to ask the boy what he was doing. With perception beyond his years, the boy replied, “*I am watching a man punch holes in the darkness*.”

“Punching holes in the darkness” – what lamplighter would ever have described his work in that way! Yet that is what he did – punched holes in the darkness – holes centered in a burning flame that illumined a path for the evening traveler, holes of light that revealed any obstacles in the traveler’s path. Today we have no need for lamplighters; we now have electric street lamps and solar lights with sensors or timers or master switches that work from dusk to dawn. Lamplighters who punch holes in the darkness are relics of a day gone by.

For some Christians, the role of the evangelist has gone the way of the lamplighter. By evangelist I do not mean the Bible-thumping, ranting, raving, heal-you-with-a-slap-on-the-forehead, sell-you-a-book-between-prayers TV evangelist with a bad toupee. I mean evangelist in the original sense of the word – one who proclaims the good news about Jesus Christ, one who shares his or her faith with others that they too might know the good news. It is the evangelist who bears the flame of faith that ignites faith’s fire in others and so brings light into the darkness of the world. It is that evangelist that some folks think has gone the way of the lamplighter.

In an information age, who needs an evangelist? We have the Internet, social media, a plethora of religious books, and the professional evangelists (both TV and RV types). The Word is already out there. You can find a voice or image that suits your desires with whatever news sounds good to you. So, who really needs an evangelist? Surprisingly God does. God needs evangelists who are willing to proclaim the good news of the Gospel. God needs people who are not embarrassed of their faith but are willing to tell the story of God’s hand at work in their lives - of God’s creating work, continuing care for the world, and salvation in Jesus Christ. God needs lamplighters who will bear the flame of faith and take its light to the world to punch holes in the darkness of sin and despair as a light to the nations. God needs lamplighter evangelists!

In November 1996 a runway collision between two airplanes in Quincy, Illinois killed fourteen people. It was a terrible tragedy for the community and devastated the families of the victims. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) was sent to investigate the collision and to help the families. A Salvation Army worker who was working with families of the victims had this to say about those NTSB representatives: “*They have been so good to these families. They stayed with them, cried with them…At first, I almost thought they were clergy people*." NTSB agents acting like clergy – staying and crying and comforting those who were grieving – that is what being a light to the nations is all about. It is about extending to those in despair the love of God, about bringing to those in deep darkness the light of love – like clergy people, like lamplighter evangelists.

It is that kind of evangelism to which we are called – the kind that proclaims the good news in day to day living regardless of the setting. It is evangelism that makes the good news as tangible as a helping hand, a kind word, or a comforting embrace – as we do in taking food to our Hispanic neighbors, helping a refugee family, and serving meals at Trinity Soup Kitchen. It is evangelism that proclaims the gospel in deeds that grow out of the good news in our hearts. But it is also evangelism that does not shirk from sharing the source and substance of that good news.

Evangelism isn’t cramming the gospel down someone’s throat; it is telling the good news with the work of your hands, the love of your heart, and the words of your mouth, as you have opportunity. God gives each of us the means by which to be an evangelist. God gives us not only the tools and opportunity, but also the good news to be shared – that God loved us enough to send God’s Son to us, that we might have life, hope, and light in our lives. The good news of Jesus Christ is cause for rejoicing as those who have hope, hope that “lights a candle instead of cursing the darkness.”

In his poignant book *Angela’s Ashes* Frank McCourt writes of his experience of learning about the faith in the late 1930s in Ireland. In preparation for his First Communion, he heard about a gospel that seemed to his mind to be lacking in good news:

*The master says it’s a glorious thing to die for the Faith and Dad says it’s a glorious thing to die for Ireland and I wonder if there’s anyone in the world who would like us to live. My brothers are dead and my sister is dead and I wonder if they died for Ireland or the Faith. Dad says they were too young to die for anything. Mam says it was disease and starvation and him never having a job. Dad says, Och, Angela, puts on his cap and goes for a long walk… I want to ask why there are so many big people who haven’t died for Ireland or the Faith but I know if you ask a question like that you get you the thump on the head or you’re told go out and play.*

It’s a glorious thing to die for the Faith, he was told, but what was there about the Faith that was worth dying for? Where was the good news to bring the light of hope into the dark days following the deaths of his brothers and sister? It was that good news he longed to hear, but didn’t or couldn’t or wouldn’t in the anguish of poverty, hunger, and hopelessness that plagued his life. *Angela’s Ashes* wrestles with the paradox of the gospel’s good news when life was not very good at all. The good news doesn’t seem very good when it is packaged in the ashes of faith or the hypocrisy of the church or the hypocrisy of the evangelist. It hardly seems worth living for, let alone dying for.

Today there are those who likewise search for something for which to live and those who long for something worthwhile for which to die. There are those who are searching for meaning in life and direction for living. There are those who are wandering in the darkness and looking for light. If you are one of those people, then hear this – your light has come in Jesus the Christ. That is the good news of the gospel! He is the light of the world who shines into any darkness with light, hope, and peace! That is the good news we proclaim as a light to the nations. We hold the flame in our hands and hearts like a lamplighter, an evangelist who knows the good news of Jesus Christ and is called by God to share it with the world.

Today we will ordain and install elders who share that calling to be evangelists, to share the good news in what they say and do as followers of Jesus. Hear then what they have to say about that calling and that good news:

*We are all called to be disciples. We all have a part to play. We all have gifts that enable us to do our part. God provides us with direction and comfort in our efforts to know what we are called to do and provides us with gifts to carry out God’s will. (Cindy Bowman)*

*The Spirit of God dwells among us still, comforting and guiding us in God’s call. I believe that God calls all people to spread the good news of the Gospel to all people. God loves us unconditionally, no matter the age, race, gender, who we love, or any other reason. We belong to God. (Seth Ward)*

*God blesses us with all of these wonderful gifts so we can go out in society to help make a difference…Think about the ways that you could go into society and help those around you. It doesn’t need to be a massive action, but rather you can start small, and with the gifts you’ve been given you can choose to increase action or maintain action. As long as there is a subtle contribution in some way, that is following through with God’s desires for us. (B.C. Sommerfield)*

*For the 30 plus years I worked in public health, I felt God had placed me there, that it was my mission field. The love and peace of Jesus got me through difficult times at work and in my personal life. Thank you, God for the personal gift of your Holy Spirit within me! (Linda Foster)*

*The power of prayer truly helps clarify your outlook. Put your trust in the Lord, and the Lord will give you a solid rock to stand on! (Randy Smith)*

*When I think about various events in my life, I know God was guiding me. If I thought I knew better and struck out on my own, God was there—not saying “I told you so,” but “Let’s try it this way.” “This way” always turned out better. (Sue Morley)*

*We can rest assured that God will continue to bless us and in our thanksgiving to God, we can bless others. So I’m able to start each day with a prayer of thanksgiving for all the blessings that God has given; I ask that I may be a blessing to someone today! Then I ask for strength to serve the Lord. (Kathleen Wilkers)*

*How should we act upon our beliefs? We should go out into all the world and spread the good news. How do we do that? We do it with our time, our money, and our talents. We show God’s love to others when they are in need… We treat people like “us” instead of “them.” We treat people the way they need to be treated instead of the way they deserve to be treated. Why do we do those things? Because Jesus did. (Brandon Cline-Taskey)*

*God is good! All the time! God’s faithfulness is with us – all the time. God’s gifts are with us, even if hidden within ourselves or within the fellowship of other people – all the time. God provides strength and all we need – all the time. All the time! God is good! (Joan Sayers)*

That is the good news we have to proclaim to the world as a light to the nations. Does your life reflect that faith that burns within you – faith in the One who is the light of the world? Let the love of Christ shine through your life! Light a lamp with a word or deed or invitation to someone to join us here; light just one lamp, for that is how God’s salvation reaches the end of the earth, one lamp at a time. Light one lamp and then another and then another, perhaps your own, for by its light God’s salvation will glow a little brighter for all the world to see, to the ends of the earth. Amen