

"Follow"

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

and Matthew 4:12-23

January 27, 2008

It is a great joy to be back among you for worship this morning. And modern technology is wonderful because I have had the opportunity to pull out the DVD's of your worship for the last two Sunday and see what it was that I missed. Having seen the video's made me really sad not to have been able to be present as our youth shared their faith and lead worship. They did an incredible job and I thank them for their witness to their faith and their leadership under the direction of Katie and Desiree'.

During my time away I did have a number of opportunities to worship. There were several very moving worship services that I had the privilege of sharing in at Luther Seminary during my continuing education time - it is always moving to be surrounded by nearly 500 pastors, seminary students and church leaders as the songs of faith are sung with such joy and forceful praise that it echos through the building long after the final note is ended. Those worship times stirred my soul and called me to reflect on my relationship with God - they lifted and encouraged me as I considered my life and all that is going on in it. Those worship times brought a new light into my world. - - - Shelly and I also had the opportunity to attend another worship during our vacation time that was much different - it was not my style and was actually rather uncomfortable for me. It was a non-denominational worship attended by a handful of people who had no connection to each other and led by someone whom I would judge to have had a more 'neo-Pentecostal' background. The message was filled with familiar Christian phrases dealing with the mercy of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. In response to many of the comments the audience was invited to add their 'Amen' or 'Praise Jesus'. All that the speaker said was true - - - and perhaps for those who are more familiar and comfortable with that form of preaching / worship it may have been an encouraging and worshipful time. But, unfortunately, it did not work for me - I was too distracted by the unfamiliar that I could not worship and I was not able to hear the good news that I need to hear to lift me out of darkness into God glorious light. Reflecting on the experience, I find myself thinking about what it is that you who sit in these pews - or listen on KBTO - or watch on cable TV experience as we share in this time of worship. Will the light of Christ shine in your darkened world? Will you be encouraged and challenged to be all that God has called you to be?

As we gather for worship, it is our hope that we have made it possible for the light will shine through the darkness. It is our prayer that you will hear the voice of God

as you are called again to walk with our Savior. I know that it does not always happen. I know that too often churches and individuals are experiencing too much of what the church at Corinth was experiencing. There was division among people - they were upset with each other - the darkness had a powerful hold on the people - people everywhere go through times when that is true. People have all kinds of issues that make it hard to come together for worship. In the church at Corinth, they had chosen up sides and the factions were killing them. If we forget that we are all on Christ's side we will never go anywhere as a church. We can become so consumed with little issues that we fail to see the light leading us forward. We can be so consumed by darkness that we can not hear or receive the light of forgiveness and love.

What is your experience of worship - what is your experience of church in general? Does it lift you - encourage you - - - does it send you out with the joyful mission that God has set before us?

I think of our first scripture lesson for today. It is the proclaimed word of God's prophet, Isaiah, to a people who had been experiencing devastating things in their lives. Isaiah saw the suffering and fears of the nation. He knew that there was more darkness to come. But he was able to point to a time of salvation that would come. Using the image of darkness and light God's promises touched the lives of the people and they were encouraged.

When I read scriptures like this one that speak of 'walking in darkness and finally seeing a great light' I can't help but think of a time when I was walking along some railroad tracks trying to get to a destination somewhere ahead. Unfortunately, at one point the railroad track disappeared into a long tunnel that had been cut through a steep hill. I was tired and did not want to climb the hill but I didn't want to walk into the dark tunnel not knowing if a train was coming or how long the tunnel was. I finally opted for the tunnel and obviously survived the experience. But the tunnel was much longer than I expected and as it curved through the side of the hill through which the tunnel had been cut, it became totally dark. It was a harrowing experience feeling my way through the tunnel - never knowing if or when the train was coming. I still remember the relief of beginning to see light returning as the end of the tunnel approached. Very often, it seems to be a good metaphor for life as we experience it. Sometimes it seems as though we get totally overwhelmed by the darkness that we experience and never know what danger lies ahead. I am so thankful to be reminded over and over of the light at the end of every tunnel - the light that shines from a gracious God who conquers every dangerous enemy and forgives every sin. That is the Good News - it is the word of the prophet Isaiah - it is the Gospel that shines from God's word that we try to proclaim as we gather for worship. Do you see the light? Can you feel God's encouragement?

As we see the light - as we are reminded of God's love and salvation we are called again to be the followers of God. The 'Land of Zebulun' that had experienced so much darkness was the area of northern Israel in which the city of Nazareth lay.

Matthew's gospel reminds us that Jesus grew up in that land and came as a beacon of light at the end of a long tunnel of darkness. As He comes with that light of God to the people of God, He calls for a response - Come - "Follow Me". Do you hear that call as you worship in this place. God shines the light of His grace upon us and He calls us to follow. Are you lifted and encouraged? Do you hear the call to follow?

I read an article that talked about the Ministry of Willow Creek Community Church. For the past 30 years they have been one of the fastest growing and most influential Christian churches in the nation. In a recent study of their ministry they found that they had been failing to do one thing that was really important - to make stronger disciples. They found that they needed to emphasis that call to discipleship - that "Follow Me" - and then really help the people who responded grow to be disciples. As you worship in this place, do you find the encouragement of a loving God whose light shines in the darkness? Do you hear His call to follow? Can we equip you to be His disciples? That article that I read said that the author had seen too many churches go from "mainline to old line to side line to offline to flatline". If this church or any church becomes nothing more than religious entertainment and hollow platitudes and does not see the light of God and respond to His call to follow it will move from mainline to flatline. God has come to bring light and life to you. Will you follow? Will you be His disciples?

AMEN