

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

December 27, 2020 – FEAST OF ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*A Candle of Hope*”

Exodus 33:18-23	(The Lord will show grace and mercy to whom He chooses)
Psalms 92:1-4, 11-14	(It is good to praise God's loving kindness, mercy, and faithfulness)
1 John 1:1-9	(God is light; in Him there is no darkness; and He forgives our sins)
St. John 21:19b-24	(Jesus encourages His disciples each to follow Him in their own way)

Today, we celebrate and give thanks to God for the life, witness and works of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist, on this, his feast day, two days after Christmas. He is the patron saint of our parish, St. John's Church, Compass. And because we usually hold a Service of Lessons and Carols the first Sunday after Christmas, we don't often have the opportunity to celebrate his feast day.

Contemporary scholars have debated both John's identity and authorship, when it comes to references to him in the New Testament. But whatever the resolutions are to these scholarly arguments, we can be confident that there truly existed a close follower of Jesus named John, and that he witnessed to the truth of Jesus Christ as God in the flesh, or, “the Word [who] became flesh,” as he expressed it so famously and eloquently in the prologue to his gospel.

John started his adult life as a Galilean fisherman along with his brother James, the sons of Zebedee, and then Jesus called them from mending their nets to follow Him. The two brothers seemed to have had a quick-tempered or excitable side to their character because Jesus nick-named them “sons of thunder.”

Of the twelve male followers of Jesus, John was clearly part of the inner circle, along with Peter and James. All three were present both at the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, and also at Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane before His arrest. Traditionally, John has been associated with the “beloved disciple” who leaned on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper. Clearly, John had a close personal relationship with Jesus.

As Christ was dying on the cross, He entrusted the care of His mother to John. Scripture¹ tells us that his mother's name was Salome, which was also the name of Mary's sister. So it may have been that John and Jesus were first cousins—perhaps another reason they were close, and that our Lord asked John to look after and provide for His mother.

On the morning of the Resurrection, it was John who ran with Peter to the tomb, and seeing it empty, *believed!* In the final chapter of John's gospel, when, after the Resurrection, seven of Jesus' disciples go fishing in the Sea of Tiberias, it is John who first recognizes the Lord standing on the beach.

As they all come ashore, we join them in today's lesson where Peter has just been re-instated and commissioned for ministry by Jesus. Having earlier denied Jesus three times, Peter then makes a threefold re-affirmation of his love for, and loyalty to, the risen Christ.

But for Peter—who tended to be kind of stubborn, impulsive, and obstinate—that's not enough. At times, in the gospel accounts we catch glimpses of sibling rivalry played out among the disciples, and here Peter's curiosity—or perhaps even resentment—about John, the “beloved disciple,” gets the better of him. Peter nags Jesus about John, saying, “Lord, what about him?”

Jesus responds by, in effect, telling Peter, “Mind your own business,” adding that John will remain until He returns—a somewhat enigmatic saying that gave rise to rumors that John would not die. It's much more likely that Jesus meant John would live a long life, and then Christ would come and take him to heaven. In fact, John was the only one of the disciples not to be martyred; he died of natural causes.

Whereas, Peter's vocation would be to become a martyr for his witness to Christ. According to one tradition, Peter suffered death by crucifixion upside down because he did not feel worthy to die in the same manner as our Lord. But such a martyr's death was not what God had ordained for John.

Of course, every person's calling and vocation are unique. What matters is that we each follow our own particular journey with Christ, rather than be distracted by the path that has been given to another Christian.

Back when I was transitioning from being a Methodist pastor to becoming an Episcopal priest—not an easy thing to do!—a fellow church member gushed to me, “Oh, I *wish* I had your spirituality!”

I just stared at her, knowing full well that the “spirituality” that she was admiring had come from five of the hardest years of my life, during which I had questioned my faith—and even my sanity—many times. Finally, I managed to reply, “I wouldn’t wish how I came to my present spiritual state on *anyone!*” and counseled her to continue walking the path God had set out for *her*, not me.

According to tradition, St. John was exiled to the island of Patmos, in Greece, by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, but he spent his last years in Ephesus—that’s in modern-day Turkey—where he died at a very old age and is buried. St. Jerome recorded that when John was too old to preach, he would simply say to the assembly, “Love one another. That is the Lord’s command. And if you keep it, that by itself is enough.” Good advice for *us* to live by, as well!

There are also apocryphal stories about St. John, such as, that he emerged unscathed after the Romans threw him into a cauldron of boiling oil. A similar tale relates that on another occasion John was handed a poisoned chalice by one of his own brethren, drank from it, and again, remained unharmed.

The Fourth Gospel, three New Testament epistles—1st, 2nd, and 3rd John—and the Book of Revelation traditionally bear the name of St. John as their author. Despite some scholars’ questioning whether he could have written all of these essential texts, what matters most is the impact these writings have on us, in terms of our daily discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel according to St. John—probably the last to be written and certainly the last to be completed—is the most amazing witness to the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And today’s reading comes from the close of that book, describing one of Christ’s final post-resurrection appearances more than two millennia ago.

A few years back, during her annual Christmas television broadcast, the Queen of England mentioned John’s gospel and the opening prologue in particular. She quoted that powerful text from John, chapter 1, verse 5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Then, Queen Elizabeth went on to quote an ancient Chinese proverb: “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” Literally translated, the proverb is: “Don’t curse the darkness—light a candle.”

That proverb became well-known in the West when it was used in praise of Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt, and First Lady of the United States. A prominent feminist and human rights activist, Eleanor chaired the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and was instrumental in the drawing up of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In an address to the United Nations General Assembly, it was said of her, “She would rather light candles than curse the darkness, and her glow has warmed the world.” The themes of *light* overcoming darkness, of *truth* overturning falsehood, and of *life* being victorious over death, are major themes in St. John’s gospel.²

Today, as we celebrate and give thanks for St. John, let us endeavor to do our best to foster these themes in our own lives. We live in a world greatly troubled by darkness, lies, and death. The global scale of sickness, poverty, hunger, corruption, and violence, may at times make our own contributions to alleviate the sufferings of others seem utterly insignificant. Yet, each and every one of us can make a difference—if only through our caring prayers.

As this Christmastide unfolds, let us continue to deepen our faith in Jesus, “the Word made flesh,” so that we can be equipped by Christ to do all we can, to assist our fellow pilgrims in their journey through this life. And let us, through our words, deeds, and prayers, light a candle of hope in the world around us—rather than curse the darkness or succumb to it. Jesus is the light of the world, and He has said that *we* are, too!³ Amen.

¹ See Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:20 & 16:1; John 19:25.

² Adapt. Margaret Anne McAlister, “St. John the Evangelist,” 27 December 2015, [richmondteamministry.org](https://www.richmondteamministry.org/stmary/sermon-st-john-the-evangelist-27-december-2015-st-marys-morning), <<https://www.richmondteamministry.org/stmary/sermon-st-john-the-evangelist-27-december-2015-st-marys-morning>> 7 December 2020. Used with permission.

³ Matthew 5:14.