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## *Testify to the Light*

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### **A sermon by the Rev. Wallace Marsh**

*"He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."*

Today's gospel reading is about identity. Twice we hear the question "Who are you? John says that he is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah, nor does he consider himself a prophet. Those gathered around ask a second time "Who are you? Give us an answer. We want to know "Who standing before us?

You probably have a similar question this morning "Who is the new canon in our pulpit? A very good question, so keeping with John's words: "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, ." Seriously, I am a voice from the wilderness! I grew up in the mountains of Tennessee, in the city of McMinnville, TN., situated between Nashville and Chattanooga on the Cumberland Plateau.

McMinnville does not have a professional baseball or football team, nor do we have large aquariums, art galleries, or a television show about our housewives. As a matter of fact, we don't even have an interstate. Instead, we have rivers, mountains and lakes.

Our version of Six Flags is a cave called Cumberland Caverns. This thirty-two mile cave system was once the second largest cave in the United States. Crawling through those tight passages, getting covered in bubble gum mud and playing in the underground waterfalls is better than any theme park I have ever visited.

My greatest memory of Cumberland Caverns comes about half way through what is known as the "wild tour." After about an hour of crawling you emerge into a large room about the size of this cathedral. As you enter the massive room, the tour guide asks the group to gather around and cut off all the lights. It is the experience of complete and total darkness.

I have a confession to make. I took the "wild tour" three or four times as a Boy Scout, meaning I could practically give the tour. So, as a high school freshman on tour with the Methodist Youth Group, I made it a point to position myself between some upperclassmen cheerleaders about the time we entered that cathedral size room. When the lights went out they were all clinging on my arm for dear life. The look on my friends' faces when the lights were turned back on was one of my greatest moments in high school.

The reason the lights are turned off is because total darkness is the only way to hear the story of Aaron Higgenbotham, the man who discovered Cumberland Caverns.

Here is how the story goes:

In 1810, Aaron Higgenbotham, a local land surveyor, was having lunch with his friends and told them about a cave that he discovered while surveying a tract of land. As legend has it, Aaron went back to that cave after lunch with a torch and decided to explore. Aaron entered the cave, moved through some passages and arrived at what appeared to be a dead end.

When Aaron looked up he noticed that smoke was drifting over what the wall. That was a good sign, because it meant over the wall there was more to be discovered. Aaron started scaling the wall and as he got to the top of the ledge he made a huge mistake""He dropped the torch and the light went out! Without light, Aaron could not go forward or scale down the wall! Aaron sat on a ledge in complete and total darkness, convinced that is how he would die.

The next day his friends gathered for lunch, curious as to why Aaron didn't show up, but didn't think anything about it. Aaron was getting hungry, cold and scared. He couldn't sleep for fear of the snakes, mice and bats and he couldn't move for fear of falling off the ledge. After missing lunch a second time, his friends got worried. They remembered Aaron taking about a cave on the mountain, and so they grabbed their lanterns and headed that direction.

The men found Aaron's belongings at the entrance of the cave, so they entered and started calling out his name""Aaron, Aaron! Three days without food or water, stuck on a ledge in a dark cave, Aaron imagined that he was hearing and seeing things. His mouth was parched and he didn't have any energy to respond to their calls, but Aaron remained hopeful, as the light of their torches kept getting brighter.

Soon they were so close that Aaron had to cover his eyes because of the brightness of the light. When the men got to the wall, they raised their torches in amazement""The stress and fear of spending three days alone in the dark had turned Aaron's hair from dark black to snow white!

I share the story of Aaron Higgenbotham this morning because it is a story about darkness and light. Darkness and light are at the beginning of creation in Genesis. Darkness and light are at the beginning of John's gospel and an important part of today's gospel passage. John the Baptist is not the light. John is called to "testify" to the light!

That is why John the Baptist says he is not the Messiah, nor is he Elijah or a prophet. Who is he? His purpose is to testify to the light. Jesus calls John the Baptist "a burning and shining lamp" (5:35). John was not the light; he was the lamp!

Advent occurs during a season when the days are colder, darker and shorter. The darkness of the days has a way to emphasize the darkness in our own lives, in this economy and in the world. In this season of darkness, we anticipate, await and long for light. That is why on Christmas morning one of the readings is today's gospel reading. And we hear those verses that come just before today's gospel: "In him was life, and the life was the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:4).

The light of Christ cannot be extinguished by the darkness of this world. It is message we hear on Christmas morning and one that we hear again on the Great Vigil of Easter, as the paschal candle is lit and brought into the dark sanctuary with the words, "The Light of Christ." It is a reminder that the light of Christ shines even in the darkest moments of our lives.

One of the great blessings of being a priest is testifying to the light. At times, we are with people in the darkest and most difficult moments of life, yet even there, the light and love of Christ is always present. It is a witness to the power of the incarnation (to the power of Christ's birth).

On this third Sunday of Advent we hear that John is not the light. John is the lamp, and you and I are also lamps. Like John, we are called to testify to the light and be open to God using us to illumine the world and the lives of those around us. That is exactly what we will do in a few minutes. With pledge cards in hand, we will bear witness to the light. With your financial gifts, the mission, outreach and programs of this cathedral will continue shine the light of Christ where there is darkness.

This morning it might be with your treasure. Later today it might be through a conversation, or maybe something as simple as a hug. It might be directed toward a stranger, a colleague, your spouse, parent or your child. However or to whomever, this morning we are called to join with John the Baptist by being lamps and testifying to the light and love of Jesus Christ! AMEN.