

# “Radiating Love, Offering Wholeness”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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## Mark 1:2-9

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight”’;  
John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair; with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’*

## 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we have on our hearts, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard proclaimed from Scripture and those words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share touch, bless, and transform all of them into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its work within us, among us, and through each of us so that this world might be a better place. We ask this in Christ's faithful name, Amen. So as is my weekly habit, at the beginning of the week, I print out the 2 texts that are going to be read during worship, Mark and 2 Corinthians this week. I read it over and on Tuesday I come back to it, I start making some notes. On Wednesday I let it sit. And then on Thursday, it's time to sort of get my hands in the dough, if you will, and kind of knead it, and work it, and play with it a little bit more aggressively. And so this week I decided I would do so with, again, a nice cup of coffee as one of my sort of favorite things to do. So I went on Thursday morning to Rise Coffee in the Grove on Manchester. I finally found a parking spot and I walk in and as I go through the door I realize, oh my gosh, it's mommy and me day at the Grove's Rise Coffee. Because the lady in front of me had the cutest little girl in her arm who was jabbering and waving to me and the woman behind me had her daughter who had the headband with the two Santas still from Christmas, the ears kind of bopping around, talking about cookies or treats and I thought to myself, "I better get my coffee to go."

I ordered a coffee and I thought, "I'm going to check upstairs just in case," because the downstairs was packed. I go upstairs, around the corner, and the first thing I see is a doorway with a baby gate and I think, "I can't go in there." So I go in this other room that looks like it's filled with Wash U grad students all working on coding computers because they're all totally zoned in, it's quiet. I find this little tiny desk that's this wide, I slide in, I open up my computer, I get out my Bose noise canceling headphones, I plug them in. And as I'm plugging them in I realize that the wall my little desk is next to is on the opposite side of the wall as the mommy and me group because there's banging, and crashing, and loud noise everywhere. And I'm thinking, "Okay," and I put on the headphones, and I turn them on, and it gets a little bit quieter, and I open up my Spotify app, and I start typing in, Bach Cello C-O-N-C-E-R-T and I find the little image and I click on it. And I hear strings begin. Music and peacefulness, every anxiety that I had about being there and trying to find the space to work, and to think, and to listen everything just settled as those strings kept playing and I thought to myself, "Appreciating music, yes, I think I will preach on that on Sunday."

Karen and I, and most notably Brad Gift and a few others who are on the New Member Committee have one of the greatest privileges in the church. We get to sit over in the lounge with the folks that are interested in joining us. And we get to hear the 'why are you joining' stories from most of them. And it's phenomenal to us. Karen and I talk about it quite a bit and we share the information with Bill and Travis about how important music is to so many of you, especially the newer folks in the life of the congregation. We did a sort of informal survey. And right now, it seems about 80% of our new members are coming into this service and they're coming because of the worship experience, the music, the preaching, and the fact that you all are nice to each other. Not necessarily in that order but you get the idea, right? I mean we are phenomenally blessed with an outstanding music program. And I wish I could remember who shared this story, so if it's not completely accurate, that's okay. I get to preach, you don't [laughter]. But I remember a story not too long ago where someone said they had an acquaintance or a friend, somebody who they knew in the symphony. And they were thinking about finding a new church and so they asked the symphony player, "well, do you know any churches where music is really important?" And almost before the question was finished, the symphony player said, "Oh, you've got to go to First Pres Kirkwood." And so they came and they joined because of the music and the quality of music that we have. And music is one of those things that we probably talk about a little bit. But it's something that I think is easy for us to almost take for granted because it is so good and we are so blessed.

I don't know about you but on Good Friday, I've sat in this sanctuary and many times asked myself am I at Carnegie Hall or at a church in Kirkwood or maybe the Christmas concert for something? I mean it is phenomenal the level of music that we have here and the blessing that each of us have. And when I put on the headphones and start listening to music and things sort of settle, it does the same things for us in worship. As the music fills the space and fills our heads and our hearts and our souls, we kind of settle as a people. And not only do we settle but I realize that our defenses, if you will, they kind of open up. We're a little less on edge. We're a little more open. We can allow the spirit of God's love to kind of be more a part of who and what we are. So I would like to ask you all to join me in just a thank you to all the musicians. But especially this day to the Chancel Choir and to Bill and to Travis. Thank you. [applause] No, we're not moving. They do a great job and they bless us and they help us sort of stay grounded and moving in the right direction with our worship. And as I sat there from Thursday onward, I realized that music and light kind of have the same impact in our lives. That music is something that we often quite can't put words to how it affects us. It just does. And that has a similar quality.

And the reason I believe that the Gospel writers and also Paul talk so much about it is it's one of the best analogies of what it means to be a part of God's family and a part of God's love. Transfiguration is not an easy concept to preach on or even to talk about. That Jesus goes up on this hill and all of a sudden becomes whiter than white. His clothes are radiating brilliance. They're dazzling. They're almost blinding. And Peter's like, "What's going on? Should we build buildings and should we stay here?" Because he doesn't know what to do because it's so white and so light and so overwhelming that he's terrified. And in the midst of all that, this

voice comes out of the cloud and it says, "This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to Him". And I thought if everything is getting dazzling, bright with the glory of God shining through Christ, is that really what it means to listen to Him? Or is there something else that Paul's trying to communicate when he says that about God. And so I looked that up and the 'listen' to Him could also be 'hear' Him, pay attention to Him, understand Him. And I took it to be open and attentive to Him. Terror closes us off. The opposite of faith is always fear. And so when it says that they were terrified, Peter, James, and John are just-- they're so overwhelmed, they just sort of shut down. They cover their eyes and everything is kind of closed down. And the voice is inviting them to be open and to be attentive.

I believe you could almost say be musical. Allow what music does to you to happen now so that your defenses can lower and your heart and spirit can open up. Not to the flow of music in this case but to the light of God's love that's shining very bright in Jesus Christ in that moment. And then Paul picks up on that and he says if they proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. And then he says, "For it is the God who said let light shine out of darkness who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God all in the face of Jesus Christ". There's a lot going on in our hearts to give light to the knowledge. But basically what Paul is trying to get people to realize, get us to realize is that the light that shown in Christ is now shining within each of us. And how do we let that light shine out? We relax and we have our defenses drop. And we open. And we have that sense of sharing that light with other people. As I was chewing on that and trying to figure out okay, where do we go with that? Jesus saying from John 8 came to mind. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life". We often use this passage in memorial services. We talk about it in pastoral counseling. Whenever someone finds that life is sort of wrapping its tentacles around them, they don't have the freedom or the luxury that they once felt to breathe, to have an assurance of God's love, we come back to this passage and say, "Wait a second. That light of God's love is within you and nothing, nothing nothing can take it from you.

When those legs or those tentacles are being wrapped around us, its hard to trust that at times but God's life and God's love is within us and its available to us and its at work in us as we open and trust and do the work that we need to do. I ran across an article this week from the wall street journal, the Saturday essay. It's called, "The Enlightenment Is Working." Its written by a professor at Harvard University, Steven Pinker. And in the article, he writes that the enlightenment idea, the human ingenuity, and benevolence can be channeled through institutions and results in progress is what it's all about. That the enlightenment that transforms society was about human ingenuity and benevolence coming together. And in so doing, having institutions and structures around that make progress happen to allow the light of God's love to come with our human ingenuity and mingle together and have there been transformation. And I don't know about you but as I sort of focus on some aspects of the news, part of me is disgusted so I don't-- I try to let most of it go by. But the other parts that capture my imagination if I let it are all the sort of lifting up of ingenuity. Google is changing everything that we know. There's going to be driverless cars and we are going to have maybe cars that hover above the ground at some point. Elon Musk has become a cultural hero and icon. He just put a car on space because he could. And so there's all this focus on ingenuity and I realize, where's the focus on benevolence? The two have to go together according to this article in order for there to be progress and goodness.

And then the other thing too that's in the mix of this is that so much of our news right now, it feels like its coming to us through a microscope. That its so focused on Donald Trump, the good or the bad and every, almost every headline you read has something to do with the president, whether you like him or you don't. And its like, "Wait a second. What happens?" And Pinker is getting us to think. He's like, "What happens if you-- instead of using a microscope, if you back up and just look at the last 30 years, has there been progress? Has there been ingenuity and benevolence coming together to make something good happen in our culture?" In the last 30 years in the US, the homicide rate has been cut almost in half. And those living below poverty has gone from 11% to 3% in the last 30 years. Worldwide 30 years ago, there were 23 wars that were raging. Now, there are 12. Nuclear weapons have gone from 60, 780 to 10, 325. Democracies, nations that consider themselves democracies have grown from 45 to 103. Oil spills have dropped from 46 to 5. Population in

extreme poverty has gone from 37% to 9.6%. And deaths by terrorism in the-- in eastern Europe have even dropped. They are halved now from 440 to 220. In the last 200 years, years.

The percentage of the world living in democracies has grown from 1% to 55% and the percentage of people who could read or write has grown from 12% to 85%. When we hook ingenuity and benevolence together, good things are happening in our world in spite of maybe what we're hearing day in and day out on the news. And it seems to me that in our culture there is quite an emphasis right now on ingenuity, on the next app, or the smaller phone, or the faster Internet. And we seem to have lost the sense of benevolence that's linked together with that and how these things can help society and people live a better life. And as I see it, this is where the church has a major role because we can focus on benevolence in a way that those that are committed to ingenuity can not. Because we trust that God's love and God's light lives within each of us. And the invitation for us is to lay down our defenses long enough to allow that love and that light to flow through us in order to make the world a better place. And music is one of the main avenues, if you will, one of the main disciplines that allow us to lay down our defenses and be emersed in the mystery of God's love and to know and trust that it's okay. What happens when we do that? I had the great privilege this week of meeting with someone in the life of the church who I knew a little bit about but not too much about. We had a conversation about some other things and at some point, I recalled that the meeting that we were having, the gentleman said to me, "Well, I can meet with you after class." And so I thought, "Class? Is he in school or is he teaching? What's going on?"

And so I asked him, and I said, "Hey, are you teaching or in school? You said that we could meet after class." And he told me the story of his volunteer work. That he was volunteering in the city schools to help adults do reading, writing, math, and enough history where they could get their high school equivalency in order for them to go on and to make their lives better, to get better jobs, etc., etc. He said he started out being a volunteer but then one day the teacher didn't show up so he filled in and he was so good that the students asked him to be their permanent teacher and so that's where it ended up. One person, listening to the spirit saying, "Yes. I can do that." And then the difference is being made. Over and over again there are stories like that in our congregation. Craig Wildey, as you've heard through the barbeque invitation, is going to spend 250 of his own dollars to rent a smoker for a weekend and fill it with all kinds of meat so that we can buy really delicious barbeque, not just so that we have a great lunch that day or that week, but so that money can be raised so the mission trip can flourish and the love, grace, peace, and light of Jesus Christ can go down to Louisiana and make a difference. "I am the light of the world," says Jesus, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Music points us in the direction of the light of life. It is something that this day we know we appreciate and we are thankful for. And I pray that God continues to bless us and our music ministry forever, and ever, and ever, amen.