

2 Corinthians 5:6-10; John 1:1-5

“Courage in the Darkness”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

It fascinates me to no end that throughout the world, in every nation and language, people seek to follow the voice of someone named Jesus. Four gospel stories about his life continue to be read, as well as many ancient letters written by eyewitnesses or by those who knew his voice through faith.

So it fascinates me that two thousand years later people still recognize and follow the voice of Jesus in their lives. This phenomenon or reality is called “faith.” Each, in one’s own language or in an adopted language, hear and follow the voice of Jesus. God is still speaking. In this last week of Advent it is important to ask, “Are we listening?”

For many years my wife and I served as missionaries in Japan, where we were blessed to serve in many ways. One group that we walked with was named the “One Step Group” (一步の会), a group of visually challenged people who met for Bible study, prayer and fellowship in one of the two churches I served in southern Japan. Every autumn, when the colors were at their peak, when the mountains were a riot of red, orange and yellow, this group of visually challenged people would bravely go hiking in the mountains.

One year we caravanned by car to a national park with great mountains and ravines, and after a picnic lunch together with shared foods and persimmons, we set out to hike together. We walked in pairs with one person guiding the other, while describing the view and keeping away from the edge of the ravines. I remember trying to explain what “red, orange and yellow” were as I walked with my friend.

Of course, this is what the journey of faith is like, for “*we walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor. 5:7). Walking by faith means walking while listening to the voice of Jesus and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The voice of Jesus describes a view that opens outward upon eternity and the colorful gifts of grace that we cannot see or know any other way than by faith. Faith both surpasses understanding, yet also leads to a life of insight and understanding.

As I think about Christmas, I think about a Savior who walks with and dwells in us. I think about the Savior’s voice that I know in my prayer life. It is crucial to remember this because we can get so caught up in the cultural Christmas that we lose sight of the One whose voice lives in us every moment and whose life is renewed in us at Christmas. Nowhere in the world will you ever be asked

to consider staking your very life and existence upon something you cannot see, and yet that is what we do as Christians. We follow a voice in the darkness of the world, a voice of light and life. This voice is the eternal Word of God, Jesus, who speaks and creates with grace and goodness.

The world is of course filled with many voices. It has always been so. Consider Mary and Joseph, a young couple seeking to find their way. The voice of Rome required that they participate in a census, so they set out for Bethlehem, the home of Joseph's forbears. It was also a journey of faith, because they had heard a voice speaking to them in the darkness of their fears describing the larger picture of God's purpose for their lives. They followed the light of a bright evening star through the night as well as in the darkness of their personal fears and doubts. They were blessed, and through their faithfulness, every land and language has been blessed. The Word they heard created the faith by which they walked giving them courage to believe and to live into God's promise.

This is what we anticipate and reaffirm at Christmas: we continue to walk by faith in the light of the Word, listening to the voice of God's larger life-giving narrative, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (Jn. 1:1). The journey of faith is a bit like "walking blind" along the edge of a mountain path, listening to the Word. The Word reassures us, giving us courage to take life's journey, knowing that the Shepherd's voice leads, describes and gives meaning to the magnificent things we see and discover along the way.

As we prepare our hearts for Christmas, we remind ourselves about two young people who believed in the promise of God and set their life's course upon this promise. Theirs was faith that gave courage in the darkness, yet so many things could have gone wrong. *They knew* the voice and Word of God in their lives, but perhaps others wondered why and how this child was born. They had nothing and their child was born in the poverty of a stable, yet they possessed everything because they walked by faith led by the voice of God's unfolding salvation narrative for all people.

We celebrate Christmas because our journey of faith begins in this story. At times it will be a lonely journey, following a voice that others may not know or understand. At times it will lead to feeling out of step with many other voices in the world offering different narratives that never quite match the scope and beauty of the Word through whom the entire cosmos was created.

When Paul wrote "*we walk by faith, not by sight*" he was also describing courage to live in this world. This Christmas may you rediscover the living voice of the Word, Christ Jesus, who seeks to lead you each day, describing the marvelous things of the kingdom so that you might share this vision and voice with others, giving others courage in the darkness. Blessed Christmas! Amen.