St. Mark's Lutheran Church January 5, 2026
Rev. Ali Rode "I'm Just the Messenger."

Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.
Matthew 7:7 (CEB)

Good morning Beloved Children of God.

Merry Christmas! This morning's worship service is a continuation of the season called Christmastide which is the 12 days beginning Christmas day whose end is marked by Epiphany which we traditionally observe January 6th. Today is the 11th day of Christmas, and although I do not come today with 11 pipers piping, we have a gospel text which has a similar effect as a large gathering of woodwinds.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overtake it."

These words are part of a passage which displays the cosmic view of how the Christ child's appearance is not a new occurrence, but rather in John's mind Christ has been a part of all Creation. John 1 is like the two creation narratives in Genesis, giving the reader context for how everything came to be. In the first creation narrative in Genesis we hear about the beginning of all things in this way, "When God began to create[a] the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[b] swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." In John's mind, he mirrors this understanding of the brilliance of light piercing the darkness, and that light is understood as Christ, who has existed from the beginning and "all things came into being through Him."

It's a very spiritual experience, seeing light in the middle of darkness. The light and the darkness have spiritual depth.

I recall an experience of darkness. It was my 7th grade year, and having joined confirmation class on the account of a good friend of mine's mother was forcing her to go—I signed up because let's be honest I did not have much better things to do. In confirmation, not only were you assigned to be in regular Sunday morning classes, but also there was a list of requirements including service to the church, worship attendance and volunteering, we had to fill out notes from sermons, and be a part of certain youth group traditions. In this moment of my faith journey I was at my first retreat in the northwest corner of Ohio in a place called Texas Ohio. Now, the post office will say it's Liberty Center, but that's just because Texas is so small, it has no mail service. There's nothing out there.

Our group had just finished the standard kum bah yah worship experience where we gathered in a circle, the lights were low, our adult counselors had shared their coming to faith stories which were dramatic as well as encouraging. More than one of the adults claimed they could hear or see Jesus or God. I had never heard someone say they could hear or see God. This was new information. We celebrated communion in a circle with a full loaf of bread and grape juice (because we were Methodists). And then, in typical youth group fashion we ended the night with glow-in the dark football and frisbees.

It was an exciting night because it had snowed the majority of the day, leaving several inches covering the field where the majority of the group played and ran around in the pitch black dark in a flat sports field. Instead of joining with the group, I felt myself with a certain sense of ache and feeling like I was missing out in some way after this worship experience. I wanted to see Jesus, although I

admit I was terrified of this idea. I wanted to hear God if others can, why can't I? I felt simultaneously left out and desperate that I receive some sort of sign. And finding myself in the darkness, and in the quiet I laid down in the snow, looking up to the void.

It was an overcast night. Everything was milky and obscured black. My heart, looking into this darkness yearned with all the angst of a 13 year old girl. In that era I was in a time where I was not only facing all the normal young teenage challenges, but in a family situation where my strong, independent single mother had decided to begin dating which was changing everything about homelife, and seemingly I had little control about such changes in a time where everything else was changing as well. Alongside of that was a childhood marked by significant bullying because I was larger than most of my classmates, which didn't honestly remedy itself until high school. Although I had a lot of things going for me, I had some inner sadness I would later acknowledge that as depression, a normal response to the gap between how I had desired life to be and how it was.

And into that dark and formless void, I prayed to God in my mind, "Please, please, send me a shooting star… and I will believe. Send it to me as a sign. I will trust in you." I wait. Nothing. Now to be fair, it was not a clear night. The sky was milky and obscure. I don't even recall the moon being out—maybe a planet, but that's it. I think to myself, here I am searching, and God will not be present to me. Why do I have to search so much when others don't have that experience? I cry. Tears fall through the sides of my face to my ears. I'm alone in this moment. Then something within me told me to wait, and so I did, in the icy snow patiently. I just made myself present in the darkness. After a few moments, I recognize I see the horizon all around, and the outline of pine trees from the surrounding woods. I feel the ice below my OSU Starter Jacket. I acknowledge I am on a huge planet, which is round, which is swirling in outer space. I become overwhelmed by the fact that I am so small in such a big world. And then, like light coming on from the inside, I felt this heart-warming rush of what I would call now presence. In my teenage mind, I realized what I encountered was the Holy Spirit. I knew God was there—no star, no shooting star, no voice, no distinct outline or figure of Jesus. I just knew I wasn't alone. I didn't have to see or hear anything. I felt, then I knew. An adult chaperone checked on me—because at this point I look kinda weird off to the side while all these kids are running around playing. "Are you okay?" "Yeah—I'm fine." I know they can't see the smile on my face.

"The light shines in the darkness." And in that moment, that light, although I didn't see it, was within my being, and the darkness, although it was still all around me wasn't as overwhelming.

In this gospel text, beyond light and darkness, we are introduced to an important character—and that is John the Baptist. The things we know about him from this passage is that he was

1. Sent from God
2. A witness to testify to the light
3. "This was he!" (or in other words he says, 'It's him!')
4. John is clear about Christ's power, he "rank's ahead of me."

There's more to say about John the Baptist next week as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, but what we need to know about him today is that his whole purpose was to be someone who would tell the people about Jesus the Christ—point to him. God our creator knew that the ministry of his Son needed a word-of-mouth pr campaign to gain traction so that when Jesus began there were expectant crowds seeking him. John the Baptist isn't a special figure otherwise, he is a voice for God among the people. He lives a simplistic life so his entire purpose is to point out something greater than himself that is to come.

He follows the popular Christian saying, "He is greater than I" which is often shown as a mathematic equation He > I.

In many ways John the Baptist's story is similar to our experience of discipleship. If he were here today perhaps John would tell us to:

Lose your ego.
Live simply.
Get people together.
Testify to your experience.

The word testify in this passage from John is Martureo which according to Strong's means essentially to witness, give personal testimony, be a messenger, to bear witness, testify, to give evidence, affirm what one has seen or heard or experienced. This is what we are all called to. It's an act of our discipleshour and apostleship to say he is greater than I.

John is saying something to the effect, "Hey, I'm not the savior of the universe, but let me tell you what I have experienced."

Seventeen years after that first Holy Spirit experience in my teen years I found myself as the adult pastor of a youth ministry in charge of teaching and sharing my faith stories just like my counselors had done with me in hopes that they too might share their story someday. I told the same story I shared with you, and in this occurrence in 2015 we also laid down on the frozen ground staring up into the sky to watch the stars but this time the sky was much clearer. After some time conversations started among the teens when unexpectedly a shooting star quickly dashed a short bit across the sky and everyone that saw it started screaming. It was a moment where I found myself speechless. I think to myself, "Okay God, it only took 17 years to answer this prayer."

The light shines in the darkness. Embrace this understanding for yourself, and make it your life's purpose to witness to that.

Amen.