

I bring you warm greetings from The Rev. Wayne Miller, Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who regrets that his schedule prevents him from accepting the invitation to preach and celebrate with us tonight.

I also bring you greetings from The Rev. Jennette Rude, former associate pastor here at Resurrection, a queer woman whose ordination here before it was deemed acceptable in our wider communion got our name in the papers, and also whose service here, quiet and unnoticed by the press, did more than I can describe to deepen and sweeten the faith life of the people of this community.

Pastor Jen likewise sends her regrets that a prior commitment prevents her from preaching tonight...so you are stuck with me...but not entirely.

Three years ago, this festival of St. John the Baptist coincided with Pride Sunday, and Pastor Jen preached that day, so we do have the gift of her wisdom after all.

She told us,

*In medieval times, people had parties and lit bonfires in honor of St. John, who was sometimes called a "burning and shining lamp."*

*The fires were a sign of Christ the Light and a reminder that like John we too are called to be light for the world...*

*But...often we cannot find the light ourselves, which is precisely why we need the light to come to us.*

*Zechariah reminds us that this is God's promise.*

*The light enters the darkness.*

*Zechariah says it comes like the dawn.*

*The bright sun might be too much and we may shrink back into the darkness, but the dawn is slow and steady and comforting and allows our eyes to adjust.*

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stand now at the cusp of a new day.

After a long struggle for real inclusion of leaders of every sexual orientation and gender identity, a struggle marked by many doubts and dark hours, we now see a gathering light on the horizon.

Last summer our national church voted narrowly but decisively to agree to disagree, to honor the faithful conscience of every local congregation discerning whether to accept or to reject the leadership of GLBTQ pastors.

It's like seeing the top of the sun finally peeking over the line between earth and sky.

For some, it is too bright, too hot, too threatening.

For others, it is too slow in coming, too long overdue, and there remains too far yet to go.

Even God can't make everyone happy.

The good news is, God's not trying to.

The Bible is full of tales of God's promises come true, many of them slow and unsteady and surprising in their development, but none of them involve making everyone happy.

God's finest promise, in fact, the one John was conceived and sent to proclaim, was regularly met with fear and rejection.

When the tender mercy of God appeared, the Gerasenes asked him to leave, the authorities tested him, and the empire ordered his execution.

The movement from Promise to Pride therefore takes a stunning detour through shame.

The sunburst of God's glory hangs limp on a cross on a dark afternoon.

The joy in Zechariah's renewed voice is not welcomed by an insecure world, which is chronically fearful that there is never enough grace to go around.

If gay men can marry, somehow it will weaken heterosexual marriages...

If two women can love each other, somehow straight men will lose out...

If there is real diversity, certainty is compromised; if there is true equality, those in power lose privilege and the precious illusion of control.

If the sun also rises on someone different than me, I must be headed for darkness, because sunlight must be a zero sum game.

We cannot fathom that grace would operate by any other rules than those imposed by our tiny assumptions.

We cannot imagine the blazing love of God any more than our eyes can stare directly into the fully risen sun.

So grace often dawns slowly, gently, tenderly, and sometimes hidden beneath the clouds.

The Light of the world comes not as a powerful man but as a vulnerable child.

John is sent to prepare his way, but rather than appear suddenly, he grows in his mother's once barren womb, slowly, steadily, giving his old parents and a tired old world time to adjust.

His father Zechariah, an old priest, received a sudden visit from an angel, a startling explosion of grace, and he handled it badly.

So the grace of God took away his voice, for a time, until the clouds could part from his soul and his eyes could adjust to the light, until his voice was ready to move from doubts and questions to song and praise and proclamation, to move all the way from a sketchy promise to sonorous pride.

It is the same journey that we continue to make, and just like we march in the Pride Parade, we make it one step at a time.

There are interruptions, inconveniences and voices of resistance along the way.

It always seems like a long, slow and indirect way from the corner of Belmont and Halsted to Diversey and the lake, but it has to be so.

Not only are there along the parade route many, many eyes yearning, straining, aching to receive the light, but those of us called to bear it need time ourselves to adjust to it.

God's dawning day of justice and joy, of mercy and limitless love for all people, is too strong for us to stare directly into, too wonderful for our eyes to hold or our startled voices to sing.

God's march from faith to fulfillment, from promise to pride, takes a long and slow and circular public path, because it has to.

There are too many people involved, even without the fearful opposition.

There are too many crowds along the roadside that need the time to soak in the brilliant good news that God's mercy is indeed for them too.

There are too many saints who go marching in the story, too many burning lamps from John the Baptist to Jen the Lutheran to each of you for justice to move at the speed of hope.

But the voice does returns to Zechariah, and the sun returns to the sky, and the promise returns to come true.

Fear and darkness and conflict and cross are part of the journey, but not the final destination.

We keep watching.

We keep marching.

And until that light shines upon all those still sitting in darkness, may God keep guiding our feet into the way of peace.