

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Bearing Witness to the Light
John 1
December 17, 2023
Advent III

I heard that there's a new Willy Wonka movie out. When I heard about it, my first thought was: Do we need another Willy Wonka movie? There was the one a few years ago with Johnny Depp. Apparently, there's a Tom and Jerry cartoon version. Wonka's been on Broadway. Did we really need another Wonka movie after the first one? I grew up first with the Roald Dahl book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* which I read over and over, and then with the original movie, Gene Wilder was and always will be Willy Wonka, leading worthy children, and their kind of weird grandparents to a "land of pure imagination."

This new one is a prequel, which means it tells the story of how Wonka became Wonka years before Gene Wilder became Wonka. My first thought was, who needs it? But my second thought is: we do need this— we need whimsical stories about magical chocolate and candies, stories that stretch our imaginations. But the story of Wonka touches us even deeper than that because what we really need in all the world are stories about generosity over greed and hope over despair, and Charlie and Wonka are part of just that kind of story. A story of wonder and delight in a world that does everything but snuffs them out completely.

What we need most of all are stories of light in the darkness. Wonka's story is sort of like that, but that's really where John's gospel shines. If there were a subheading, it would be that: *The Gospel According to John: Light in the Darkness*. It doesn't have magical candies, but it does have water turned into the best wine anyone ever had before. It doesn't have a river of chocolate you can't get in, but it does have a river and a man standing in it waist deep in it, telling you, "Come on in, join me, be baptized. The one I'm going to tell you about is going to change your life and the world. He is the light coming into the world; he is the light of the world."

And so on the third Sunday of Advent, we turn to John's gospel for a story about the other John, John the Baptist, and as we do, we turn to stories about light and generosity and hope and wonder and delight. That, by the way, is why the candle is pink, not purple on the third Sunday. While the season of Advent bears witness to the world's desperate need for God (dark, purple candles), the third Sunday of Advent, right in the middle of it all, bears witness to the first signs of divine light that we have eyes to see. The candle's lighter. There's light here. There's life here that bears witness to the light and the life that is still yet to come. Today, we move into the 2nd half of Advent: from God is coming, to God is near.

John the Baptist is the icon of this. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was

not the light but came to bear witness to the light, the true light, which gives light to everything that was coming into the world.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we bear witness to the Light that is coming through stories we need to tell of generosity and hope. Even in the long nights of Advent and the hard days of life in the world, there are reminders all around that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We need stories like these. We need stories that are not the light but bear witness to the light.

Today is a day for bearing witness to the light in people and stories that themselves are not the light but point to a light that is coming and coming soon. A light in the darkness story is not a story of marshmallows and candy canes. A light in the darkness story is a story of deep need and pain and suffering into which hope and joy and love come penetrating. That's a A light in the darkness story.

Here's a story, if you ask me it's even better than anything Wonka could cook up:

Delta Airlines and Children's HealthCare of Atlanta team up this time of year. Just after sunrise in early December, dozens of stretch limousines pick up children and families from Children's Hospital. These small children have cancer, leukemia, neuroblastoma, brain cancer, and sickle cell disease. They rarely, if ever, are able to leave the hospital. But on this day, they ride in style, in a caravan of limos, led by a police escort with dozens of motorcycle officers, parting the congested Atlanta freeways and making their way to the airport. The children and their parents emerge out of their limos and walk in, hobble in, some are rolled in to the airport to crowds of cheering airline employees and other passengers and elves and their guides. There on the Departing Flights Screens above their heads, scroll down with your eyes and you'll see it: departure flights scheduled for Chicago, New York . . . North Pole - Gate F10: Boarding Now. The kids don't understand much but you ask them, and they understand one thing. What are you doing today? I'm going to the North Pole!

Each child is given a boarding ticket and ushered onto a waiting plane with a real pilot and everything. They pull the blinds shut for the super-fast flight, sing carols, and have lunch. In an hour the plane 'lands' at the North Pole, and the kids all come off the plane into a winter north polar wonderland prepared just for them. Santa is there and Mrs. Claus and elves. They take pictures and get all the candy they can eat. They have a celebration. By the time they're done, they are pooped-tired, and then they return, back to the place from which they came, having been given this gift.

This is light in the darkness for those children, for those families, for anyone who hears that story. If you can watch a video of that and not choke up, you're more stoic than I. And so we can say: Delta airlines pilots and gate agents are not The Light, but on this day, they bear witness to a Light that penetrates the darkness of human suffering and sadness and lost dreams and lost childhoods. They bear witness to the love of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Now you get it. Now you see where we are going with this. Here's another story.

50 years ago the little town of Stonewall, Mississippi, had a magnificent municipal pool, 100 ft long by 30 ft wide. In the summers, children swarmed there, spent their whole summer days splashing, swimming, and getting relief from the deep south heat. The white kids did, anyway. The black kids weren't allowed to swim in the pool. When integration came to this old mill town in the early 1970s, rather than opening up to everyone, city officials closed the pool and drained it. Dump trucks filled the pool with truckloads of red Mississippi dirt. It was buried and forgotten for over 30 years.

A newspaper photograph from 1969, headlined "Fun at the Pool," shows it filled with splashing children, all white. "Our summer life centered around the swimming pool," they said. Yet there was no protest when the pool was filled with dirt several years later. "Nobody stood up," said Oree Davis, secretary of the local historical society, her voice edging into bitterness. "They just took what came their way." "It was the worst thing that could have happened," she added.

In 2006, thirty years after the pool closed, a local real estate developer was poking around the area planning a project to try to bring some development back to the old mill town. A spade hit fancy blue tile and then underwater light fixtures and smooth white walls. The forgotten old pool had been found.

The businessman, a former political candidate named Gilbert Carmichael, decided to spend \$25,000 of his company's money to excavate the pool and rededicate it to all, blacks and whites, in this struggling town of 1,100 just south of the highway hub of Meridian. Today the pool is alive and well, the centerpiece of the community, and children from the whole town are welcome. A picture from this summer shows the pool full of children, all kinds of children playing in the water.¹

Let us say: Gilbert Carmichael is not The Light, but he bears witness to the light which penetrates the darkness of human division, distrust, fear, hatred, and old, pathetic histories that haunt us until they are dug up and shown the light of day. He bears witness to the hope of Christ. Thanks be to God.

There are people like this and stories like this all around us Maybe you have a story in your own life. Maybe you know of an experience or been part of an experience like this. Some are done in the name of Christ, and some are just done for reasons even the people involved don't fully understand. Some are done with planning and intention; some just happen. They unfold, and you don't know you're part of it until they're just upon you. The world is full of them if you're looking.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/18/us/18pool.html?searchResultPosition=1>

So who has a story to tell? Who among you has a story to tell like this? A Light coming into the darkness story? I could close my eyes and say, “I feel the Spirit leading me to one of you.” But I actually planted one of you, so I’m not going to do that. Steve King, tell us this beautiful story.

About seven years into pastoring thirty-nine years Cherrydale Baptist Church in Arlington, Virginia, a series of events unfolded that to this day amazes me. The background is that there was a young girl in our church named Sue, who was a godly young lady in her twenties. A young man in the community named Rob began to indicate to her that he would like to court her. But she wasn’t sure about his commitment to Christ, so she said this to Rob, “The only way this relationship will go further is if you go meet with my pastor, and I want to know what he thinks.”

So Rob happened to be a large, muscular guys, a football player, who was sitting in my office; he did not want to be there, but he wanted the girl. So I can still picture him with his arms folded, seated by the window, and giving me a message with one theme. “The reason I’m not going to come to Christ is because I know people don’t change. They just don’t.” And he went on and on, and then he zeroed in on one person. He said, “Danny Gray. People like him never change.” And then he told me that Danny Gray was the head of Ku Klux Klan in McLane, Virginia. “And let me tell you what Danny Gray did to me—people like him never change.”

What Rob did not know is that Danny Gray was seated in the next office. And Danny Gray had come to Christ. I had been in a small group with him for five years, and we had hired him as our facility manager. So I said, “Rob, I’ll be right back.” I went to the office and I said, “Danny, you’re a man of God. I want you to walk in my office. You’ll know what to do.” So Danny walked into my office, and Rob’s mouth dropped. He’s in utter shock, and Danny tells him his story, how he’s renounced racism, he’s come to Christ, and said to Rob, “Would you forgive me, please?” It wasn’t long after that, Rob came to Christ, he got the girl—I married him to Sue—and one of the greatest joys I had for thirty years was seeing Rob and Danny after church, close friends in Christ.

It’s the kind of story that gives you hope. Danny Gray is not the Light, but he bears witness to a Light that transforms. The Light of Christ transforming the hard heart of a person who at just the right moment brings light and hope to another. Thanks be to God.

One more story:

A pastor, Jeff Hood, serves as a spiritual companion to Kenneth Eugene Smith. This is a story unfolding, right now. Kenneth Eugene Smith is a death row inmate in Alabama. Smith is scheduled to be the first executed in Alabama, or anywhere in the country using nitrogen hypoxia, a process so fraught with possible trouble that the spiritual advisor was required by the state to sign a waiver agreeing to stand 3 feet away and to acknowledge the risk, slight as it may be, that a hose may detach and the gas which is invisible and has no smell may leak and

endanger his own life. "When I first got in touch with Kenny," Pastor Hood said, "one of the first things that he asked me was, 'are you prepared to die to be my spiritual adviser?'"

Pastor Hood has been present for several executions in Texas, Oklahoma, and Alabama. But this one is different because of the risk. He takes the waiver home to talk it over with his wife, with whom they have 5 children. He considered what it would be like for his wife to support their children alone. But even if the worst happens, he decided, it's important for them to know what he stood for. "They will understand that their dad, their father, always said yes."²

On November 15, he signed it, saying, "I just cling to a real knowledge that, 'greater love hath no one than this, that one would give their life for their friend.'" Jeff Hood will be present with Kenneth Smith in January when the state ends his life.

Let us say this: Jeff Hood is not The Light, but he bears witness to the Light that penetrates the darkness of death, retribution, guilt, punishment, shame, and loneliness in the. He bears witness to the faithfulness of Christ and to the hope of God's enduring, saving grace.

These are just some of the stories bearing witness to the Light of the world. I hope you have yours today, even in these long nights of Advent. Stories of generosity over greed, hope over despair and wonder and delight. And grace. These are the kind of stories that keep us going, that renew our faith, that give us hope for tomorrow. The kind that embolden us and strengthen us and the kind that keep us looking for the light, even on dark nights.

We're not here to bear witness to human potential and niceness. We're not here for escapism into imagination. We, of course, are not ourselves The Light. These things, these stories, and these people are not the light, but we bear witness this day: the light is coming into the world.

And when he comes, the darkness doesn't stand a chance.

Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2023

² <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/12/1218591962/alabamas-upcoming-gas-execution-could-harm-witnesses-and-violate-religious-liber>