Sermon from Rev. Jeanne Loveless
Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
San Lorenzo, CA
www.sanlorenzochurch.org

I am home now… (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

While I was at home last week, I had the opportunity to drive by the church I grew up in, a small Disciples church in Southern Indiana were I served as their interim pastor for a few months. As I sat out there in the parking lot remembering that experience, I recalled, I had mixed emotions about it. I had a deep sense of rooted-ness having grown up in the community. But I also knew the church was in a much different place theologically than I was. I also knew that this was the church I had left in frustration many years ago when I was struggling to make sense of things. But I remembered being excited because I had the opportunity to be the first woman to pastor there I knew I certainly be the first pastor, male or female that lived into a liberal theology that was going to be a little different than anything they had experienced before.

As I served as the church's pastor over the months…inside I noticed that I was keeping a sense of emotional distance. . I knew that some of my hurt was still there. And I tried to pray my way through it. After all this was the place where my spiritual journey began as a child, but it was also the place where I watched and learned that the church can be so very very human. I busied myself with my work as pastor and tried not to dwell on it too much.

As I went into the sanctuary that winter Saturday afternoon to prepare the baptistery for a baptism that was to occur the next afternoon….as I climbed down inside and fumbled for the button, the old heater vibrated to life and the water poured out of the faucet and spattered into the bottom. I stoppered the drain and turned to move up the green fiberglass steps. But as I did memories began to come over me from so many years ago. They had been there all along just under the surface of my busy-ness. I stopped and stood still as I remembered playing with matchbox cars on those steps, and building a Lincoln log fort on the bottom with the other kids during one of many potlucks.

As the memories bubbled up, I remembered putting my hand on the rail and stepping down the steps into the water with Pastor Joe who smiled and held his hands out to me as he stood there wearing his white shirt and tie and his rubber fishing waders.

He asked me some questions about believing in Jesus and then placed a handkerchief over my mouth and I bent my knees as he dipped me backwards into the water. I was aware of being under the water for a moment. But it was all over very fast like jumping off the high dive at the swimming pool.

When he raised me up and the water had run out of my ears. The first thing I could hear was my grandma Vera who my Dad referred to with some frustration as "a shouting Methodist holy roller…" lifting her voice in praise much to the surprise and shock of my liturgically reserved Disciple of Christ relatives and friends around her. "Thank You Jesus!" She said standing up in the third row, alone as the rest of the congregation was seated… clapping her hands together as they looked at her with eyebrows raised and jaws dropped. "Oh Yes Jesus! She's home! She's home now!"

I hung on to the side of tub as the memories washed over me. I could hear the sounds of the old Conn organ, and smell the hot candlewax and hear the clinking of the little glass communion cups. I could hear the congregation singing "How beautiful to walk in the steps of the savior. Stepping in the light. Stepping in the light." The tears welled up in my eyes as I stared down at my bare feet and my toe rings and the legs of my bellbottom jeans that were now dragging in the rising water. I could hear her voice echoing across the years. "Thank you Jesus…Oh Yes Jesus! She's home now!

As the tears streamed down my face, remembering her, remembering all of them that had been there on that special day. As I stood in the icy water that was gathering in the bottom of that baptistry, on that holy ground. I thanked God for the ways that his light breaks through our darkness sometimes. And I also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt as grandma clapped her hands and shouted to Jesus and cheered me on in the back of my mind with the all the loving wide eyed Disciples around her raising their eyebrows and looking around uncomfortably. That after so many years of exile of wandering around in the darkness.. I had forgiven others and myself enough, and I had let go of enough to release the hurt and step into the light again. And I knew that something within me. Something deep inside my blood and bone had indeed found its way home.

On this special day we look forward to Taylor's Baptism and many of us remember that our own baptisms can evoke memories from deep within us. They may make us think of places and people and sounds and tastes from long ago. As Disciples many of us will remember that important time in our lives with great fondness. As Taylor and I have discussed over the past few weeks Baptism signals the beginning of our journey with Jesus Christ. And one of the first places we encounter the practice of Baptism in the scriptures that is connected with the message of Jesus Christ is through the life and work of John the Baptist. So it is with John's account of him that we find ourselves on this special day.

John is a fascinating character. All four of the gospels mention him. Matthew and Mark tell us that he wears camel's hair and a leather belt and that he eats locusts and wild honey like Elijah and some of the other prophets of Jewish tradition. All of the Gospels note that he is preaching on the banks of the Jordan. Calling for repentance and baptism in view of the approaching Kingdom of God. He is often associated with his cry recorded by Matthew and Mark to "Repent… for the kingdom is at hand."

Now John the Baptist is no doubt, attracting a lot of attention out at Bethany across the Jordan. Because the Jews have sent their best and brightest to question him and see what all the excitement is about. The Priests and Levites, ask "Who are you?" And John says "I am not the Messiah…" They ask him again, and He says he is not Elijah, or another prophet. Instead he tells them using the words of the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord." So not to be one upped, by the Levites and Priests, the Pharisees decide to get some answers of their own. They ask "Well, why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" And to their question John replies, 'I baptize with water,

but among you stands one whom you do not know. The one who is coming after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.'

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." That is an interesting choice of words that must have caused some teeth grinding among the powers that be. The Pharisees and Priests were probably taken aback, saying. "We'll know the one who is coming because we are God's Chosen. We can testify to the light!" And yet, Matthew vividly reports John the Baptist's response to this kind of thinking. "You brood of vipers! …Do not begin to say to yourselves. 'We have Abraham as our father"

It's easy to look down on the Priests and Pharisees from our vantage point. But their response is telling for us because as the church, we have inherited John's responsibility of testifying to the light of Jesus Christ. Like John then, it is now our responsibility to be the witness, to be in the know about Jesus who stands among us today. And yet I wonder? Are we always centered enough as believers to testify and be witness to the light? Are we really able to see from whatever vantage point we find ourselves looking from today, where Jesus is among us? Or like the Pharisees and Priests, is our view distorted? Have we wandered out or gotten pushed into the darkness so we don't have such a good view to witness to or testify to the light? Have we gotten pushed away from the light by holding onto loss or resentment? Have we become weak in our ability to testify to the light of Jesus?

Sometimes times bad things happen and it is easy to blame God. Maybe we are abused, or violated in some way through no fault of our own. Maybe we are hurt by the unconsciousness and judgmentalism and self righteousness of others. Maybe we are filled with grief from losing a spouse or parent or dear friend. Maybe we lose our financial stability or our children or parents take paths that make us feel out of control and a little crazy. Maybe it's a combination of things. Maybe we just get resentful from giving and giving and giving and never feeling like we are appreciated or are enough. After so much of that we feel victimized and hurt and the pain and loneliness and grief builds up and gets us moved off center. When that happens we can have a lot of trouble seeing the light let alone testifying to it.

Some of us move away from the center, and lose our focus on the light for other reasons. We may not know exactly why…All we know is that we can't find it or don't feel it even though we are going through the motions. And that leaves us feeling empty and then we end up stuffing that emptiness with things we think might fill it… Maybe some more money, Maybe a different job, Maybe a really nice looking new boyfriend or girlfriend, maybe a new car, or a shopping trip to Macy's. We may stuff that empty space with alcohol, or painkillers, or rich food and drink or a shopping spree or a big table of food that makes us feel abundant even when deep down we are fearful and unsure. We may stuff that dark hole inside with self-help books and tapes, and thousands of dollars of therapy because we feel so unworthy. All because we have lost sight of our center that place from within where we can clearly see and testify to the light.

And then on the other hand, some of us grow in self esteem as believers. We have found Jesus and we know we have found something special. We know we have found the way and we want to show others. So we hold that light in ourselves up proudly singing “this little light of mine. I’m gonna let it shine.” But then somewhere along the line we get hurt, or we don’t feel heard, and we sing louder and feel just a little more righteous. Cause after all we have the way. Jesus is our shepherd and we are his chosen sheep. And then, this little light of mine moves from shining freely to becoming the only light. It becomes judgmental and self righteous. And after it becomes the only light, then we get really confused because we start to think we are the light. After all we got the right Jesus, and the right way. As somebody once said, “Abraham is our father. We will know the light.”

No matter where you find yourself today. In joy, in sorrow, in grief, in exile, or feeling a little too righteous and in need of a dose of humility. The voice of God is crying out to you in your wilderness. Repent. Remember your Baptism. Remember where you started. Return to your center. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent. Return. Come home to the light. Jesus is still shining. He never stopped. Come on home where you can get a better view. Come home to where you can witness to and testify to the light.

The Hebrew word for Repent is Shoov. It is used liberally by the Old Testament prophets to call the Israelite people to return to God. We often think of Repentance as something we do before we are baptized. Or as a kind of confession of sin, an emotional declaration of the things we have not done so well.

But I give you the thought today that the Hebrew word repent can also mean “return.” To repent is a call to return… To retrace one’s steps to the beginning… To take a look at where we veered off the path. Maybe even on a daily basis. It is a very empowering thing for us to do as believers. When we repent and return and retrace our steps we regain the power to clear out the baggage that is blocking our view of the light of Christ within us. When we return and repent in this sense, we regain the power to forgive, and release, and move forward so our own baggage is cleared and again we can testify to the light of Jesus Christ that lives and breathes within us in the tradition of John the Baptist with power, with love, and with clarity and humility in a world that is stumbling around in the exile of darkness trying to find its way home.

That voice, the one crying out in the wilderness calls us on this Sunday morning to Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Are you ready? To Repent… to Return… to retrace your steps so you can find your way and show others how to make their way out of the darkness? Repent…retrace your steps. Forgive others. Forgive yourself. Let go. And Let God. Pray for God to move in your life and show you what is blocking your witness to the light this morning.

And when it comes to you in whatever way God brings it on…. And if you ask for it. God will bring it on. Maybe gradually. Maybe all at once. Maybe when you least expect it while you’re standing with bare feet and jeans dragging in icy water remembering the place where you began. When God does bring it on…May you feel the release, and the

peace, and the deep knowing in your blood and bones that you are “Stepping in the light.” Because when you do feel it. When you have clear witness to the light of Jesus Christ shining in your soul you may not care what the folks around you think… You may just want to stand up… And clap your hands together and shout, “Thank You Jesus. Oh Yes Jesus….I am home now!”