

December 17, 2017
Third Sunday in Advent
John 1:1-12; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

THE WORD MATTERS

I was listening to NPR the other day, driving in my car so I couldn't make a note of who was being interviewed, or what exactly his publication is, but he is some kind of journalist or sociologist who makes a list every year of words and catch phrases previously not heard of or not widely used that have entered the common conversation. Here are some examples for 2017: fake news, alternate facts, #me too. And the number one word of the year: complicit.

There was nothing positive or uplifting on the list. It was one of those mildly amusing stories about you know, the crazy world we live in. But I have to say I've been struggling with keeping a light-hearted attitude about the crazy world we live in. It made me think about these words from the prophet Isaiah—the number one news caster of his day. Look at his list of words: liberty, comfort, gladness, good news to the oppressed, healing for the brokenhearted, (NKJ). Now those are some uplifting words!

And then we turn to the Gospel of John, also using poetic, uplifting words to describe the indescribable, explain the inexplicable. In the beginning was THE WORD, the light of the world, darkness shall not overcome it, true light that enlightens.

Those of us who live in a time where the worldly word of the year is complicit, have to wonder: how do we respond to the prophet's promises and the John's testimony to the light?

Well our reading from the Thessalonians answers that question with Paul's own list of words and catch phrases: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give

thanks, test everything (he's talking about fact checking) and hold on to what is good.

His is a good list for those of us who want to be ready for the Word who became flesh and lived among us; testify to the light, do not be complicit in the ways the world finds to keep others in darkness.

Easy to say right? Not so easy to do. Or maybe it's easier than we think. Some of you saw a video I posted on Facebook this week about Michael Kent, a convicted felon and former member of a white supremacist group. While he was in prison he had racist words tattooed on his back and chest. When he was released, his parole officer turned out to be a black woman. Tiffany Whittier, who considers her job a calling. She didn't just wait for him to come into her office for his weekly check in, she went to his home. She told him to take the Nazi Flags off the walls and replace them with something positive. Like smiley faces. He did it. Eventually, they built a relationship. She became like family to him. And then, he had the racist tattoos removed. A painful and expensive process but one he was thrilled to undertake when he heard about a tattoo artist who removes hateful tattoos for free. NBC and NPR both did stories about it. He has found employment working on a chicken farm owned by Latinos where he is the only white person out of 13 employees. And guess what they are like family to him. All because Tiffany chose to make her life's work a testimony to the light.

But who else is testifying to the light in the story? Who else refuses to be complicit? Michael Kent of course. But so is the tattoo artist who removes hateful tattoos for free. And guess what, so are the mainstream news outlets that told the good news story that went viral. Well, I'm not sure it quite qualifies as viral. It's probably too much of a feel-good story to reach that category.

We Christians are called to be in the world but not of the world. That means we don't close ourselves off from the rest of the culture, clinging to ourselves,

shutting out those who don't believe the same things we believe. At the same time, we don't get to waltz through life with rose colored glasses, complicit in the powers of darkness. We are to be active participants in all aspects of our society, from our educational institutions, to charitable organizations, to politics. Yes even politics.

In our communities and our personal relationships, we are to testify to the light. Give thanks in all circumstances. Hold fast to what is good. All around us there are those who bring good news to the oppressed, love justice and hate robbery, who comfort those who mourn. We can be among them, we can join them in testifying to the light, pointing always to Jesus who came and lived among us, who is among us still and who will come again.

Rejoice, Give Thanks and Sing