A Year of Confident Hope: *Remember Who We Are*

John 1:1-14

The author of the gospel of John was writing to a community facing a massive change. The John Community was made up of Jewish Jesus followers. In the years since Jesus had lived, been crucified, and resurrected, there had been some significant change in the Jewish world. Most importantly, the temple had been destroyed by Rome. Since the destruction of the temple, the Jewish people had been attempting to work out what it mean to be the Jewish people without a temple. The local synagogue had become the place to gather to try to figure out what it meant to be Jewish in this new age with no temple. The Jewish people would gather in the synagogue to pray, worship, and hear teaching from rabbis and Pharisees.

Quite often there would be different flavors of Jewish faith and practice for different synagogues, kinda like the different flavors of Christianity that exist even today. If a person or a group of people in a synagogue were found to have a different way of thinking than the dominant group in their particular synagogue, they could rather quickly find themselves thrown out. Students, contests for popularity weren’t always played out on snapchat and Instagram like they are for you, or in the cafeteria at school like they were for me – sometimes contests for popularity exist in the places we should least expect them – like a synagogue. And the popularity contests in the synagogues too often ended just like they do on social media, in the cafeteria, or in the workplace: with someone being thrown out.

This John community was one of the groups of people who were thrown out of their local synagogue. The other people in the synagogue disagreed with the idea that Jesus had fulfilled the hopes of Israel, so rather than hearing them out, they banished the John community from the fellowship. In the eyes of the local synagogue folk, those John community people were heretics, no longer part of their family.

The author of this gospel of John, writing to the John community, was writing to a group of people in transition. They had been thrown out of their faith community. Change was happening all around them. So the gospel-writer helped them, pause, take a deep breath of fresh air and remember who they were.

Friends, we find ourselves this morning in a moment of transition, coming out of a crazy season. We’ve been eating a ton of good food, watching a ton of football, shopping like crazy and opening a lot of gifts, and in the midst of it all, we are moving through the early phases of a significant change in the life of our church. Suddenly, on this side of Christmas, we find ourselves looking around the corner at a New Year; a year of change. And it’s not only change in the life of our church. Our lives are constantly changing. Some of us will go into the new year anticipating change – maybe we’ll retire, or change jobs, or get a promotion. Maybe we’ll get accepted into our favorite school, or maybe we won’t. Students, our friend groups may change on us, who they expect us to be and what they expect us to do could shift and change. Any of us may face an unexpected crisis. Who knows what the new year will bring?

So following the whirlwind of Christmas, and facing a year of transition as a church and as individuals, it’s important that we pause, take in a deep breath of fresh air, turn to the word of God and remember who we are.

With the backdrop in mind of a John community facing a massive change – rejection by their synagogue community, we turn back to the gospel of John.

The gospel writer begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things came into being through the word, and without the word not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4** in the word was life, and that life was the light of all people. **5** That light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

The author of John begins his gospel by asking the community to think of Jesus as indestructible light spoken into existence by the word of God.

Light is helpful and powerful. Over Christmas my sister told us that one time she had stayed up later than the rest of us reading in the den. She turned out the light to go upstairs, convinced that she would easily make it through the wide entrance into the hallway, and she promptly ran into the wall. Light is helpful. It can save you a headache. Light is also powerful. It literally wakes up the world. I understand that Lee Allen typically runs like 2 marathons every morning. He wakes up early and runs and watches the world come alive as the earth rotates and the sun rises. He’s described it to me in this way: you start out running in silent darkness, and as the sun rises, the chorus of the birds rise with it. Light is powerful. It literally wakes up creation. Jesus is the light of the world – the helpful and powerful light that cannot be put out.

Having identified Jesus as the light of the world, the author moves on*.* Starting in verse 10, the author says this to the John community:

**John 1:10**   He, Jesus, the light, was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11** He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

As my sister learned, the light only helps if you turn it on. The light only helps if you recognize its helpfulness and its power. The author, writing to the John community that has been kicked out of the synagogue, is explaining to them that the people that had kicked them out had failed to turn on the light.

Jesus had come to them as the fulfillment of all of their hopes. He was the messiah. He was the King. He had the power to make them the perfect family of God that would fill the earth with the love of God. He had the power to help them fulfill their purpose. However, they didn’t recognize his helpfulness and his power and so they didn’t turn on the light. They didn’t trust Jesus. Instead, they kicked out the very people who carried the light of the world with them.

The author explains to the John community that being kicked out of the synagogue *does not define who they are*. *Being kicked out of the synagogue has no power over their identity.* The John community is defined not by rejection, but by their trust in the light of the world, Jesus. The light of the world, Jesus, had given them power to become the children of God who would fill the earth with the love of God. Being kicked out of the synagogue was a massive change, *but it didn’t change who the John community was. The John community, despite the big change, remained the family of God, filling the earth with the love of God, through the power of the light of the world that cannot be extinguished.*

The author of the gospel of John writes to a community in the midst of change and transition; they’ve been thrown out of their synagogue. So he reminds them who they are: they, the John community, are the family of God through their trust in Jesus.

Friends, some things never change. Though we enter this new year in a moment of massive change for our church, we can still enter this new year with a confident hope. Our hope comes from the helpful and powerful light of the world, King Jesus. Yes, we face change, but *no*, we are *not* defined by it.

Individually, this year, maybe we’ll retire, or change jobs, or get a promotion – yes, we will face change at work, but *no* we are *not* defined by it. Maybe we’ll get accepted into our favorite school, or maybe we won’t. Yes, we’ll face changing future plans, but *no,* we are *not* defined by it. Students, our friend groups may change on us, who they expect us to be and what they expect us to do could shift and change. Yes, we facing changing social expectations and popularity contests, but *no* we are *not* defined by it. Any of us may face an unexpected crisis in our families. Yes, we face change, but *no,* we are *not* defined by it. Who knows what the new year will bring? Will it bring change? Absolutely. Will we be defined by that change? Absolutely not.

In this opening of the gospel of John, the gospel-writer reminds a community going through a massive change that through Jesus, no matter what comes they are still the family of God.

My brothers and sisters, Though much has changed in these last few weeks, and much will change in the coming months, remember who you are – the family of God through the help and the power of the light of the world. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, let’s enter this new year with a confident hope by remembering who we are. Join me in prayer.