It is good to be back from Liberia, West Africa and to the land of hot showers! It is the one thing I really miss for somehow cold water bucket baths just don’t do it for me. And it was an interested transition this time as we got back just in time to prepare for almost two feet of snow so it was sort of surreal to leave 90+ degree weather sweating most of the day to shoveling and freezing most of the day, but we are back safe and our work went well and for that we praise God!

I do promise that once we have our video put together, our pictures printed and our profiles ready to go we will schedule a Sunday so you can see and hear about the ministry we do there. Suffice it to say we allow over 1400 students to go to school and in order for the program to run we have to go over every year and take their pictures and update their academic information. So, just picture us getting in a vehicle every morning, traveling to the school we are taking pictures at that day where the students can walk up to 3 hours away just to come to school. We set up in a room with a couple of tables and chairs and then our doorman starts letting the children in with a long line of students and parents waiting to come in.

The students who have been on the program know the routine and we are very blessed since we have been doing this for over 15 years to have a volunteer group of our graduates from the program who come back and help us every year. They are a symbol to these students of what can be, for our graduates take vacation from their jobs as bankers, nurses, health coordinators, community organizers, and civil engineers to help sign the students up every year.

We can also tell the very new students in the program for they often come in with a parent and their eyes get as big as sauces as they look at us because for some it is the very first time they have seen a white person. We had a chuckle this year for up country in different parts of the bush the Chinese are there helping to put in a coal-tarred road. That is the only light-skinned person some of those children have seen so when we were driving in that area in our vehicle the children started pointing and running alongside the car saying “Chinese man, Chinese man” so in parts of Liberia we are considered Chinese!

When the little ones come in who are not familiar with a white person we often look at them and then smile or wave at them and they quickly run behind their parents and some instantly start balling at the top of their lungs for this strange person has noticed them. Their parents quickly pick them up into their arms and start reassuring them that these white people are safe and in fact have come to help them get an education, a coveted thing in Liberia.

Liberians as a people are a very curious, quick learning and loving. Often when a younger child gets scared trying to answer our questions as we update their academic information, an older child will instantly come and stand behind them, put their hands on their shoulders and help them understand the question and interpret what we are asking. All of these helpers, our graduates, the parents, the older students in our program make our job easier. In fact, it would be almost impossible to do without them helping to interpret for us, helping our new and younger students to understand.

The church year we are presently in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means that which is revealed, is made manifest. Marcia started off this Epiphany season sharing the story of the Magi and how the baby Jesus was revealed to them and the wonder of the light in the sky the Magi followed and then the wonder of the light born in this child that first Christmas day. Rebecca followed up with Jesus’ experience in the temple as Jesus light continued to grow and Marcia at our last service (before the blizzard of 2016) looked at how Jesus’ light is a light for all people. Our topic today is the ability to discern the light.

It is interesting that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke share part of the birth narrative with us and as you heard from the scriptures that Rebecca and Marcia preached on, some of the only passages of scripture we have about Jesus’ youth. Today’s scripture comes from the Gospel of John who starts from the very beginning of time to describe the light of Jesus. “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and was God.” God has always been a God of relationship: God the father, son and holy spirit; God the creator, redeemer and sustainer; God the parent, child, and mover. God saw the need in the world God created and sent his child, his son, the redeemer to share his life giving light. There is a story I learned as a child that helped me understand this, it may be one you have heard before.

One Christmas Eve a family was getting ready to go to their church’s Christmas Eve service and the father didn’t want to go, what was the point of sitting through a church service that didn’t mean anything to him particularly when there was an upcoming snow storm predicted. So his family left without him to go to church and he got his pipe and sat in front of his cozy fire reading his paper when suddenly he heard a thump, and then another thump.

He got up to see what it was and realized it has started snowing and the wind had picked up and there was a flock of birds caught outside in the storm that were trying to get into the heat and light. He thought about it and got an idea. He put his hat, gloves, and coat and pulled on his boots and went outside and opened his garage door and turned on the lights figuring they could weather the storm in his garage. He waited but none of the birds flew into the warmth and light of his garage. So he started to try and shoo them in, so there he was trying to run in his boots shooing a flock of birds who flew every which way as he ran toward them but never into the garage.

Then he had the bright idea of trying to coax them in with food so he tried making a trail of food into the garage and on the garage floor but the wind and the snow kept wiping it away and he tried holding it in his hand and leading them in but nothing worked. He realized with the temperature falling and the snow intensifying that the whole flock of birds might freeze to death within feet of a warm safe place to shelter until the storm passed.

He thought if only I could become a bird I could lead them to safety and save the whole flock and at the exact moment the church bells began to ring in Christmas day and he fell to his knees and said, “I got it, I got it, God forgive me I understand why you came.”

I love the way *The Message* translates it:

What came into existence was Life,
    and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
    the darkness couldn’t put it out.

God sent Jesus, the Life-Light to teach us how to live and love and enjoy life abundantly. Sometimes you and I have trouble discerning that Life-Light and knowing what steps God wants next in our lives so God sends people in our lives to help just like the Liberian parents were teaching their children it was ok to trust these white folk and the older students took the time to help the younger students answer the questions for the next steps in their educational process.

First Baptist church is a place for us to come and learn about that Life-Light and how to live and share that Life-Light and love. There are people in our lives who need to hear of this Life-Light, who want to experience this love, who are looking for a place like First Baptist church where they will be accepted and loved and taught what it means to love and help others learn of this Life-Light.

Today we are taking the opportunity to thank those who have shared their talents on First Baptist’s boards and are rotating off and commissioning those who have said “yes!” to joining a board and using their gifts and talents to help FBC grow and share the Life-Light of Jesus. I invite you to pull out the Service of Recognition Service and for Laura to come forward to introduce the members of our congregation who are rotating off and those who are coming on…..segue to service.