Third Sunday of Advent

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St. James Episcopal

December 13, 2020

John 1: 6-8, 19-23

***To what are we pointing? To the light, to the light…***

Last week we met the camel hair wearing, locust and honey eating John the Baptist, this week we do a 180 degree turn and meet a whole different John.

Most of us know John and refer to John as John the Baptist. The John of John’s Gospel is never called the Baptist. Rather, this is John the Witness. While he is described as doing some general baptizing here and there, a careful read of John’s story of Jesus’ baptism reveals that John does not baptize Jesus. His primary role is not as one who baptizes but one who testifies to the light coming into the world, a very human witness to a cosmic event.

The Gospel of John begins with a cosmic birth story - in the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Smack dab in the middle of an out of this world, beyond time and space beginnings of the Gospel of John is John.

Interrupting this cosmic birth story, John is first described as who he is *not* — he is not the light, but came as a witness to testify to the light. Nor is he “Elijah” from the Gospel of Mark. The jump to verses 19-23 in the lectionary passage has John himself answering the question of “Who are you?” with “I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah.” The questioning of John’s identity leads to John’s adamant denial of what he is not.

John identifies himself in, through, and by his relationship with Jesus. Whereas Jesus defines himself as “I AM,” John is clear to say, “I am not.” He is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. He is not the light that shines in the darkness. Yet, even in his resolute claims about who he is not, who he is and why he is here is defined by, and inseparable from, the presence of the Word made flesh in his midst.

He knows nothing but to articulate his identity in connection to Jesus’ identity.

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Which caused me to wonder, can we make similar claims about our purpose and our identity? Can we/ would we respond to “who are you?” with the same indivisibility with God and all that God wants us to be? Do we locate our identity as intimately with Jesus?

The John of the third Sunday of Advent is the John that points to Jesus and says, “Behold, did you see him? It’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

For John’s Gospel, sin is not our moral laxity or the various transgressions we have committed. Sin is unbelief which has as its tragic consequence separation from God.

Here comes Christmas.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.” Before “the Word became flesh” is the claim that light shines where light should not be.

What difference does it make to imagine that a first testimony of God becoming human is light in the darkness? This is extraordinarily hard for us to comprehend when light is taken for granted on a daily, minute by minute, basis.

In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History,[[1]](#footnote-2)* Bruce David Forbes provides a helpful synopsis of the importance of light for early celebrations of Jesus’ birth. In the dead of winter, in the midst of darkest and the shortest days of the year, festivals of light were essential. John’s first declaration of the incarnation, that the light of the world is continually shining when darkness prevails, speaks to a fundamental human need for light. Before there is the Word made flesh, there is the promise that in the midst of all of the darkness of humanity, now light will shine.

You may have noticed that we have a Christmas tree outside our church. Thanks to Anna Lou Flynn and David Koegle - Anna Lou secured the tree and David (with Anna Lou’s help) made sure it had lights. I am grateful to both of them. What I am most grateful for is that there is now light that shines in the darkness. At night, our hope is that the tree may bring a smile to someone’s face- that the lights on the tree may bring joy and it will help our church appear warm and friendly - and maybe someone will be reminded of the light that shines within the church walls and why we exist as a church - and the reason why Christmas is celebrated.

Sometimes the smallest amount of light can bring hope.

John shared that he was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. What does it mean to testify to the light?

Into the bleakness of this time and winter, Christmas is coming and with it, the light of the world.

In this time of Advent, of anticipation, perhaps we should think about how we can shine the light of God’s presence into the shadows of human brokenness, bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and releasing those imprisoned. How can we - how do we - bring light to our community?

John the Witness reminds us of the importance of pointing to even the tiniest light and saying “Look, behold, the Lamb of God!”

In this season of Advent of preparation, what does it mean to prepare? Maybe, preparation means simply adjusting our eyes to see light around us. Maybe preparation means praying about the direction God would have us to take as a congregation during this time of Covid- to prayerfully consider how we can make an impact in our community and world. God calls us to be witnesses like John who point to Jesus and say “Look!” How can we be intentional as a congregation of pointing and say “look”?

Perhaps during this season of Advent, which has been different than so many others for us, pointing and saying, “Look!” can be our preparing the way.

Amen.

1. Forbes, Bruce David, Christmas: A Candid History, University of California Press, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)