

Sermon; Advent 3; Church of the Ascension, Chicago
Sunday, December 13, 2020
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There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. Jn 1:6.

In my work training hospital chaplains, it is a common practice for a student to visit a patient, write the visit up using an agreed upon verbatim format, and present the visit to their peers in a group setting for discussion.

This is actually a very challenging process because the student is encouraged to move away from reactivity, in response the critique of their peers, to a posture of curiosity.

The benefit of this learning process is that the student who presents the visit is offered four or five different perspectives, other than their own, on the student's pastoral work during the visit. In receiving the feedback of their peers, the student is offered a broader and often richer perspective of what transpired during the visit.

Something similar happens for us in our reading of the four Gospels. Each Gospel account provides us with a different perspective on the Christian story.

The Gospels do not always agree on the details of that story. And so, the accounts of the Christian story can vary. Like the students who are invited to move from reaction to curiosity, as we read the Gospels, we are invited to move from literalism to curiosity around what each Gospel writer wants to share with us out of their own individual perspective.

The ancient world had little difficulty with these textual differences, unlike our own times. I think our difficulty is rooted in an extraordinary lack of imagination.

The Gospel of John, written by the Beloved Disciple, has a particularly unique perspective. It was written last, and long after the origins of the Christian story. It was also written almost entirely within the Greek philosophical tradition.

None of the other three Gospels speak of Jesus as "The Word, the Logos or Wisdom" and no other Gospel begins with a cosmic event, announcing the coming of the eternal Word, in what is clearly Greek philosophical concepts.

To point out one particular difference, last Sunday we read a passage from the Gospel of Mark, describing John the Baptist, and his ministry of repentance through Baptism.

This week we are again introduced to John the Baptist, this time from the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple, but from a very different perspective.

Today we are offered a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, as we meet a wholly different John than the one presented to us last Sunday in Mark.

The John the Baptist we meet today is less a baptizer who calls us into repentance, and more a witness of an extraordinary cosmic event. In fact, in today's account John never actually baptizes Jesus. Rather, John's primary role is as a witness to Jesus as the Light who shines through the darkness of the world. But more than that, John is not only a witness who observes an event. He is also a witness who actively testifies to and proclaims that event.

Today we are presented with an invitation to reflect on what would it really mean for us to take up John's witness, and not only to believe in the Light that he proclaims, but also to proclaim it ourselves.

What exactly is the nature of the Light that John invites us to believe in, and to proclaim? And why light, and not something else?

It is the nature of light to reveal, to show forth, to make evident. And so, Jesus comes among us to shine a light on the darkness of the world.

The Beloved Disciple, in writing his Gospel, had a very particular light in mind when he referred to Jesus as “the true light which gives light to every person coming into the world” (John 1:9).

The Beloved Disciple wants to remind us that Jesus came into the world to tell people the truth. Jesus is the light that takes away the darkness, the falsehoods and lies, that it is the nature of the world to propagate.

The writer of the fourth Gospel makes the assumption that many of us live in bondage to lies and deception. The Beloved Disciple wants us to realize that we live in a world where there are angelic battles being fought in spiritual realms over our very souls.

As the writer to the Ephesians so graphically informs us, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Eps. 6:12).

And so, John the Baptist, in the witness we have before us today, is less a man calling us into repentance, and more a man calling us into action. “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (John 1:25).

That cry is a cry of protest. That highway is made straight by proclaiming the truth, the truth as represented in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That truth and those biblical events represent are central to the nature of human life and human destiny.

John the Baptist is our Season of Advent persona. Every year we are re-introduced to him during this Season of light, and repentance. Today John is presented as a model for you and I not only in our Advent observance, but in our living out of the Christian Way.

An aspect of our Advent observance is the call from the Scriptures to be alert. We will be mindful of Jesus’s warning to his disciples from the Gospel of Mark: “*Stay awake. . . what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.*” (Mark 13:35-37.)

There is a sense in which the command to stay awake and John the Baptist’s witnessing to the Light are very much connected.

What does it really mean to stay awake?

I believe that staying awake is very much about discernment, about really seeing things as they really and truly are. But this discernment, this seeing, like John’s witnessing, is never simply a passive response to the world around us.

I believe that staying awake is about shining the light on the truth, both about ourselves and our world.

I believe that staying awake is very much about bearing witness to what the Light reveals.

I believe that staying awake is very much about bearing witness to what the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple calls the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In the world in which we Christians find ourselves, staying awake is a kind of protest, a protest very much in the tradition of John the Baptist.

John’s ministry was a ministry of watching as well, calling him to discern the signs of his times, a watching that called him into an awareness of a new reality - a new truth, a new way, and a new life.

John is our example of remaining faithful to the watching so central to the Season of Advent. His ministry shouts aloud in protest, the truth about the world around us, and the truth about what it means to be a part of the human community.

John's is a protest proclamation that seeks to witness to the truth. As we take up his ministry for our own, we will not only want to witness to the truth of the Christian Way, but also to the importance of witnessing to the truth in every realm of life, both personal and communal.

We will want to bear witness to the truth of political processes that speak to fairness, civil discourse, and that strive for the genuine good of all people.

We will want to witness to the truth that protects us from disease.

We will want to witness to the truth about political and cultural systems that disadvantage the poor and needy.

We will want to shine the Light on all of these things, and discern together, as a community of persons dedicated to one another, the way forward.

And I want to remind us that all of this witness is driven by the content of our baptismal covenant.

I do not want to leave you without paying some attention to the exuberant words of St. Paul from today's Epistle. *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1Thess. 5:16a).*

This after all, is our "Refreshment Sunday", a reprieve from the discipline of repentance, to the expression of joy, traditionally indicated by the pink candle on the Advent Wreath.

I could preach another entire sermon about the nature of Christian Joy. But for the moment, let me simply say that Christian joy is our state of being, even in the face of trial and tribulation. It is a grace given at Baptism, so that we may endure in a sometimes-dark world. Christian joy is always informed by the Christian perspective of Hope.

You will note that as Paul invites to be joyful, he also exhorts us, in the same breath to "test everything", (1 Thess. 5:6b), and so we are once again back to the theme of today's Gospel.

I want to leave you this morning, with the words of one of my mentors, when I was a young student at the University of Kings College in Halifax, Nova Scotia. (*Rev. Dr. Robert Crouse, St. Peter's Publications*)

"At this time", he says, "we prepare ourselves to rejoice in the Light, the Word made flesh, because that grace filled joy shows us that amid all the confusions and uncertainties of our lives, amid all the fancies and fads of this world's gyrations, there is the fact of God's coming.

There is the revelation of the mystery of God with us. This is the mystery of which we are ministers and stewards; servants of a returning Master, "Who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsels of the heart." (1 Cor. 4:4)