

Advent 3, December 13, 2020 (John 1:6-8, 19-28; Is 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps 126; I Thess 5:16-24)

The holy gospel according to John, the first chapter (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

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. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" (a prophet like Moses was expected) He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place where John was baptizing. This is the gospel of the Lord.

"Who are you?" Take a moment and think how you might answer that question. It depends on who's asking, doesn't it? If someone in Edgar asked me that, I'd probably say, "I'm Pastor Gail from St. John and St. Stephen." When I visit my mom at The Gardens in Wausau, I say, "I'm Gail, Elaine Peterson's daughter." The one time I got to walk my grandsons to school, I said, "I'm Nathaniel and Logan's Grandma, from Wisconsin." The *context* determines what we say when we're asked who we are.

In today's gospel the priests and Levites, sent by the Pharisees, wanted to know what was going on. They'd heard that John was baptizing—something only the Messiah or a prophet would do. So they asked him, "Who are you?"

Does his answer seem odd? "I am not the Messiah." (Think of context again: when might you answer that question with a negative? When I visited a synagogue in Green Bay, I said, "I'm not a Jew, but I'd like to join you in worship." If I went to Soldier Field for a Packers/Bears game, I'd probably say, "I'm not a Bears fan.")

John said, "I'm not the Messiah." "Well, are you Elijah?" (The Jews of Jesus' time believed that when Messiah came, he might appear as Elijah.) Another negative answer: "No, I'm not." Same thing for "Are you the prophet?" "No."

"Well then, for heaven's sake, who *are* you?" Finally they get an affirmative answer: "I'm the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.'"

Isaiah is the prophet most frequently quoted in the Christian scriptures (what we call the *New Testament*). Jesus himself, in his first public words in Luke's gospel, quoted a portion of today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures (what we call the *Old Testament*). ***The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*** (Luke 4:18-19).

500 years before the time of Jesus, Isaiah had urged the Jewish nation to change their priorities: to care more intentionally for the oppressed, the poor, the captives—all the downtrodden, marginal people.

And still, by the time Jesus began his ministry, things hadn't changed. The down-and-out were still marginalized, with no one to advocate for them. John the Baptizer called the powerful and mighty to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but still no one with any authority was speaking up for the widow, the orphan, and the alien (foreigner) in the land.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." These words of Isaiah were echoed by John: **"Make straight the way of the Lord."**

Isaiah and John words speak to *us*, 2000 years later. God has given us both the privilege and the call to prepare the way for the Lord. Not only in our own hearts and lives during this season of Advent, but also in our families, our schools and work places, our politics, our communities. How can we straighten the path so that *others* can see Jesus?

John said he was *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness*. **We** certainly know what the wilderness looks like, don't we? This year, 2020, has been a wilderness of biblical proportions: the pandemic, economic crises, the pandemic surging again, more economic crises, no end in sight for the pandemic. We've been in a political wilderness for the last six months: who will lead this one nation under God? (Will we even *be* "one nation," undivided? Will we even *be* "under God"?)

And all those things that are unique to 2020 are in addition to the "normal" human wildernesses of grief or loss, pain or shame, fear or worry; of illness, or brokenness of body, mind, or spirit. It may be a wilderness of depression, or hardship, or difficulty coping—especially at this holiday season when so many people feel sad or lonely. And despite the COVID plague, some are still living in a wilderness of mad shopping (mostly on line), counting down the number of shopping days—plus delivery time—left before Christmas.

Do we really want to prepare to meet our Lord in *that* kind of wilderness? Advent is the season of waiting for the baby Jesus to be born in the stable—but it's also when we await the One who comes to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn. *That's* the genuinely *good news* of these four weeks before Christmas. That precious little baby whose birth we'll celebrate in less than two weeks will grow up to the Lord and Savior of all humankind, the One who will free us from all ills in this world and the next.

But there's even *better* news! We don't have to wait till the Second Coming to receive the blessings that Jesus offers. He's already at work in our hearts, minds, and lives.

That's the gist of Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica. **"May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you (Jesus) is faithful, and he will do this!"**

When you were baptized into Christ's death, you were *sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever*. The Holy Spirit took up his dwelling in your heart and begs to be allowed to work within you. **"Do not quench the Spirit!"** writes Paul. **"Do not despise the words of the prophets."** Like the prophet Isaiah.

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If I ask again, as I did at the beginning of this sermon, “Who are you?” what will you say? Maybe **I’m a baptized child of God or a forgiven sinner; a servant of Christ; a member of St. John or St. Stephen; a member of God’s family.** Or how about this: **I’m a follower of Jesus who is trying to make straight the way of the Lord and who is trying to help others follow that road.**

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!