

Bearing Witness to the Light

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Have you ever been on a flight when the voice comes over the speaker saying something like, “This is the captain speaking and I’m asking the flight attendants to suspend their beverage service and return to their seats and that you straighten your seatbacks and fasten your seatbelts. We’re going to experience a little turbulence.”

An airline pilot saying you’re going to experience a little turbulence is the equivalent of a doctor or a nurse saying, “you may experience a little discomfort.” You know what that means! It means, “Get ready because this is going to hurt!” And on a flight, the captain’s words mean the airplane is going to see how much stress it can take at 30,000 feet without, you hope, breaking up and we passengers are going to see what feels like to be inside of a snow globe held by a toddler.

This is Advent – and we’re going to experience a little turbulence.

John the Baptizer is in the spotlight again this Sunday – he’s in the spotlight two of the four weeks of Advent.

John sits in the glare of spotlights and floodlights, microphones around him, the room packed with reporters, onlookers, and various officials trying to get a look at this unknown prophet-like preacher who has suddenly become very known. Indeed, he is so well known that his preaching is creating turbulence. John is making the crooked ways straight and those in power have built their careers on

keeping things crooked. So, the Religious/Political authorities have called hearings.

The chair calls this hearing to order and they receive the John's oath "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you Yahweh." Immediately, one of the representatives on the panel aggressively asks, "Mr. Baptist, who are you? Are you the Messiah?"

John puts his hand over the microphone, leans over to whisper to one of his disciples, and then leans forward into the microphone, "No."

"Mr. Baptist, are you Elijah?"

Again, John whispers to his disciple and answers, "No."

The representative dramatically waves a piece of paper, "Mr. Baptist, I have here in front of me a document attesting that you have been quoting the prophet Isaiah, and we can plainly see, sir, that you are dressed like the prophet Elijah. Sir, if you're not Elijah then who are you?"

After consulting with his disciple, John says, "I have a statement to make. No. I am not the Messiah. No, I'm not Elijah. And no, I'm not the prophet. That is all I have to say."

The crowded room erupts with clamoring noise. The chair bangs his gavel, "Order. We must have order, or you will be escorted from this hearing. Now, Mr. Baptist we ask again, who are you? Why are you out in the wilderness preaching?"

John says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

The committee chair leans forward and looks over his glasses, “Mr. Baptist, if you’re not the Messiah and you’re not Elijah, what are you doing baptizing? And what can you tell us about the Messiah?”

John pauses, takes a sip of water, then speaks with great passion, “Among you stands one whom you do not know. I’m preparing the way for the Messiah, but you, Mr. Chairman and all of you on this so-called distinguished panel, wouldn’t know him if he was standing in front of you. Every one of you who is obsessed with power is unable to recognize the Messiah.”

The chairman shouts, “Mr. Baptist, I must protest your insinuations. I hereby order this hearing to be moved into executive session behind closed doors.”

John stands up and says, “‘And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not’ (John 1:5 KJV). Mr. Chairman, I will not participate in the darkness of a closed hearing!” Then he gathers his papers and walks from the room with his retinue of disciples following him.

The room erupts and the chairman is banging his gavel screaming, “Mr. Baptist! You must return! You have not been dismissed! This hearing has not been adjourned! We must have order. Order!”

Outside, the press is waiting and in the glare of more spotlights and floodlights, cameras and microphones, John pauses, “What I’ve said to the committee, I’ll say in the light of day to the public: You’re looking for the Messiah in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. You’ve got your own idea of who God is and you’re not open to changing your mind. Therefore, you’re going to miss the Chosen One of God.”

Are you experiencing a little turbulence? This is Advent.

In the Gospel according to John, light and darkness, seeing and blindness are significant metaphors for knowing God and knowing Jesus as God made flesh. Right off the Gospel is telling us there are a lot of us who don't know the Living God made flesh among us because we cannot comprehend this is who God is. We're blind even though we think we see just fine.

Furthermore, the darkness is both outside of us and inside of us. Only the Living Light of God in Jesus Christ can set us free from our addiction to darkness. But when addicted, not everyone wants the light. After being in darkness so long, light might be painful and revealing in ways we do not like. The Gospel writer says of the Living Christ, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him... his own people did not accept him" (John 1:10-11).

Nevertheless, the testimony of the New Testament is that this Living Light known as Jesus Christ shows us as much of who God is as we ever hope to see. We might be expecting God to be a conquering leader or perhaps our God is in a gurgling stream or the breeze through the trees. But the testimony of this old book and those whose words are recorded in it, is that while God might and indeed, certainly does come to us in various ways, the fullest and most complete revelation of God comes to us in this lowly Jew from Nazareth, Jesus.

John's job is to prepare us to meet Jesus Christ, the Living God Incarnate and to point to him. As the old classic King James Version put it, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness to the Light, that all people through him might believe. He was not that Light but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every person that cometh into the world (John 1:8-11). To put it slightly

differently, earlier I said John was in the spotlight for much of Advent. More correctly, John is the spotlight shining it on the One who is coming.

Note two related words, which are important for us this morning and are important to John's Gospel. The two related words are "witness" and "testimony." Both words are found frequently throughout the Bible, and both come to us from the imagery of the courtroom.

To be a witness or to bear witness is to give testimony. It means to tell of what happened to us or what we saw. In the courtroom, truth is contested. There is no universal truth already agreed upon by all parties in the court. The prosecution has a version of the truth, and the defense has a different version of the truth. The judge and the jury listen to different testimonies from various witnesses to try to establish what is real or what is the truth, and which witnesses are worthy of trust.

John the Baptizer is a witness. He testifies that he is not the light but that he points to the light. He is not Christ but he points to Christ. He is a witness.

Sometimes we wish that God had given us something more certain, some kind of truth that would be unassailable and indisputable, something totally and instantly convincing. We sometimes wish Jesus had come in a way where the entire world looked and immediately saw and knew exactly who he was. But that's not the biblical way. It's not the way of Jesus. We don't recognize him even when he is standing in front us.

We moderns like certitude. We want the unassailable facts, the undisputed truth. Fundamentalists want an inerrant Bible where every letter is dictated by God and old-fashioned liberals want the pure facts beneath the layers of culture, time, and history. We want the original words of Jesus or what Paul actually said.

Of course, we've learned that very little of that is possible to find. Like peeling the layers of onions, eventually we discover there is nothing left. All we have is the testimony of these people and these various writers of their encounters with the Living God. They are witnesses, and we have to decide whether or not to trust their testimony.

And here's the thing. From the biblical perspective and the way of Jesus, the only way to verify the testimony as truth is we have to jump in ourselves; we have to participate. Biblical truth and Jesus truth does not coerce, does not use power to overwhelm, and does not manipulate. Jesus' truth invites us to get involved. There is no objective truth we can observe or study as a disinterested, standoff scientist. No, we have to leave our nets, get up and follow. The Living God in Christ might be standing in front us, but we have to follow him in order to recognize him.

A few verses beyond our reading today, Jesus shows up and John points to him telling his own followers that there goes the Lamb of God, the Messiah. John's disciples go over and ask Jesus if he is the Messiah and Jesus responds, "Come and see" (John 1:35-39). We are invited to come and get involved and find out, and in the process, we will be able to see.

Denise Levertov, one of my favorite poets, was not a Christian when she began composing a lengthy poem, a "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus" about the disciple doubting Thomas. After several months into the process, she wrote, "I discovered ... the experience of writing the poem – the long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process." She referred to this process as "work that enfaiths" – as she worked, she came to faith, she became a Christian. It was the very process of involving herself by writing that she came and saw.

We come and see and in turn we become witnesses. We testify, we point to the Light. Our job is not to make things come out the way we want them to. It does not mean we will see the results we want, especially in the short term. We walk into a completely dark room and we tend to think that we can flip a light switch and the entire room lights up. And when we can't get the entire room lit, no matter how hard we try and work and organize, we are tempted to give up and give in to despair and exhaustion. But being a witness is more like lighting one candle in the dark room. Our job is to be that one candle.

To keep going and keep on lighting candles that participate in the Light is the challenge. Of course, that's partly why we gather together every Sunday to sing and pray and hear the Scripture. It is partly why we'll all gather around the bonfire tonight. We are refueled. And our hope is renewed.

Hope makes all the difference. A prisoner acts differently when he or she knows they will eventually get out in contrast to one who knows they will never get out. I could tolerate radiation therapy better because I believed it was actually healing and making a difference.

Advent is about remembering and celebrating Christ has come, Christ comes, and Christ will come. God is not done with us or with this old dark world. There is more to come.

The small candles of light we hold up, no matter how feeble will one day participate in the great Light of the new heaven and new earth that old John of Patmos foresaw. He says that someday there will be a new heaven and new earth, and there will be "no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light ... and there will be no night" (Rev. 21:23-25).

Perhaps you saw the news last week of a far Right-Wing member of the Polish parliament using a fire extinguisher to put out the candles of a Menorah that members of parliament had lit to be in solidarity with Jews during Hannukah. It was another effort of the darkness.

At the same time, I remember the story from a few years ago from a suburb somewhere in New York. It was a typical suburban cul-de-sac street with about a dozen or so houses on it, and one of the houses was Jewish. That particular December the Jewish house had a menorah in the window celebrating Hanukkah. One night Right-Wing hate criminals smashed the window, tossing the menorah out into the yard, and spray-painted a swastika on the side of the house. The very next night, every house on the street had a menorah burning in its window (Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, p. 80).

Think about this for a moment. You know and I know these kinds of things don't just happen. We know the kinds of things that went on that day after the hate crime and before the neighborhood of menorahs shown that night. Someone heard about it and saw it and started talking, making phone calls, texting, emails, walking door to door. Others joined in, coming up with ideas, plans, trying to figure out where to get menorahs on quick notice, how to get them, organizing money, going to get them. Some folks probably had to take off from work to help get it done. Probably someone had to do childcare.

What I'm saying is that all those details were parts of lighting candles and pointing to the Light. They were witnesses to the Light.

Our Mission's Committee is working on our sponsoring an immigrant family in the next few months. We will house them and help them get settled or help them get to where they want to go. We cannot resolve the immigration crisis

by ourselves, but we can help one family. We can light one candle. We can point to the Light.

The poet and activist adrienne maree brown, who lives in Detroit, wrote a couple of years ago, “Our actions have to be towards the world we want. We need to do guerilla gardening and turning people’s heat and water on. We need to be the guerillas putting up solar panels in the hood. That’s what Detroit has taught me.”

I like that. We live in hope therefore we do guerilla gardening, put up guerilla solar panels, put up guerilla menorahs, sponsor guerilla refugee and immigrant families. We light guerilla candles.

However small, we are witnesses to the Light.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.