

JOHN 1: 6-8, 19-28 Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 Luke 1: 46b-53 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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Last week David talked with us about John the Baptist and here is John, again in our Advent Scriptures. Why is John so important in Advent?

I think, first of all, Author John was writing late in the first century for a group of people who were struggling under the weight of separation from their Jewish roots, who had been awaiting the second coming of Christ, but had not yet seen it. For this group, then, needing to understand how to wait and what they were waiting for, John the Baptizer, Witness to the coming of the Light, IS the nativity of the incarnated one. John assumes the first coming, to stress the importance and nature, of the second coming.

Our human growth into the recognition and receiving of God's light is the second coming of Christ in which we are participants.

Secondly, dear John struggles so with his situation ... he knows that the light is coming, but he is such a product of the OLD WAYS. His Father, Zachariah, is of an ancient line of Temple Priests; his vocation is of the old-style prophets who brought the word of God from God to God's people. God only in the temple, God from afar.

God's interaction with us is about to change. It would change from God in the temple, only accessible by priestly intervention to a personal relationship. It would change from the God speaking through Prophets, to God speaking within our hearts. In this story of John, he is not the Baptizer, but the witness. He is the one, trusted because of his old, revered credentials, clearing the path for the new way ... the light of the world. The Light of the world that is not far away, but right in our midst.

I feel like John knows in his head that a new world is emerging, but he just can't 'be' that light. We thank John for showing us how hard it is to give up our old ways, even when we know that the new way is better, more full of light, and ever so close. Sometimes, like John the Baptizer, even though we are not in it yet, we can FLING the news of the "light that is standing among us" into the world, even when we don't feel like we are there ourselves.

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.

Yes, this is an important message to repeat at Advent. We may not be there, but WAIT ... we are assured by a very trusted source, "John of the Old Ways" that God's creation is with us, the light of God is already shining on us. Even if we're not ready, there's time because God is always ready. Thank God.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, celebrated in this church as 'JOY'. Paula spoke of 'hope', David spoke of 'peace' and today is for us to see JOY.

Now, I ask you .. what is joyous about John? He was a man of great beginnings. Priestly father, a God-driven birth, a divinely chosen name. His job was to loudly proclaim the end of an era so that the beginning of the

new era could happen. But he isn't part of the new era ... he's just the messenger ... just smoothing the path ... just the Zamboni for Jesus ... just waiting for something that is called 'the light'.

Can there be joy in the uncertainty of waiting?

Think about that moment that a magician is about to reveal VOILA... that space of waiting where there is all kinds of possibility ...

For Big Bang fans, think about the debt we owe these television scientists that told us about Schrodinger's cat ... in a box and while we are waiting it's whatever we want it to be. Is the cat dead? Is the cat alive? Yes ... we wait for certainty with this most wondrous human capacity; our imagination. We have choices while we wait.

Paul, in talking with the church in Thessalonica, tells us 1 Thessalonians, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

FIND JOY

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

Test all prophecies ... reject every kind of evil ... THEN REJOICE, PRAY AND GIVE THANKS

Ahhh, but human life ... how do we rejoice, be happy in the face of misery? How can we find happiness in a world still embracing murder of each other as a viable solution to any problem? How can we find joy in a world where people are starving, where big people hurt little people, where 'winning' is more important than everyone having enough, where 'being right' is more important than being in community.

Our Isaiah reading is at the time after the Israelites had been freed from exile by the Persian King. However, returning to their homeland was not a particularly fabulous treat. Judah was ruined and desperately poor. For us today we can hear in Isaiah's word from God, that, no matter what mess we have been in, no matter how badly we have ruined things, no matter how devastated we have been, God knows that we are in a mess and God, eternally with us, will give us strength. We are to have

a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. (We) They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah proclaims that, even when we are broken and down, we can be joyful because God is with us.

We heard from dear Mary, mother of Jesus today. What a joyful song she sang.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favour on the lowly state of God's servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name;

And what wouldn't a strangely, miraculously pregnant, unmarried young woman in the first century of the Middle East, NOT have to be JOYFUL about? Mary chose JOY. You may know of a lovely song, "Mary Did You

Know? ... Mary did you know that your son would do all the wondrous things he did? ” There is a recent, equally haunting rebuttal to that song that reminds us (and I quote), “Yes I freakin’ knew! I was there ... that’s the whole point.”

Mary was chose to be overwhelmed in the JOY of God.

In the world of John the Baptist, the people were oppressed and beaten down and tired. What does John tell them to do? REPENT ... turn around... while we wait for the light. If we’ve ever felt oppressed – maybe we’ve lost a job; or maybe the terrifying, rampaging interest rates are destroying our ability make mortgage payments ... we may shout, “How can I REPENT, John? I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m the oppressed one here!”

A long time ago I participated in an exercise that involved going to a traumatic event in our lives, an oppressive time. Of course, I went straight to my ‘deserting dad’ scenario. We were asked to describe the situation and tell how we felt then and how we felt now. I have invested a great deal of time in this ‘oppression’ because I was twelve when he left and I’m much older than twelve now (smiley face). We were asked to outline how we contributed to our misery in the story. WHAT?!? I was just a child, what could I possibly have done to contribute to that mess?

I needed to REPENT ... to turn ... and while I waited JOY would help me do that. I couldn’t change what happened, but I could change my mind and with this most wonderful human gift, I could IMAGINE a future that did not weigh me down. I could IMAGINE that I lived in a world that was full of JOY.

When JOY isn’t evident, imagine JOY. What could it hurt?

John the Baptist came to give testimony for the coming light. The pharisees asked him, “Are you the prophet?” ... “are you here to tell us what we’re doing wrong?” “NO”, says John. “I’m just here to ‘testify’ for the light ... to tell you that the light is real in your life and it’s very close by you right now.” Christ is already among us, but we may have a recognition problem. When we are oblivious to the presence of the light that is immediately in our midst we may ask, “So, where is that JOY of Christ hiding?”

We just need to know where to look. Joy does not come from this sermon. Joy does not come from all the works of this church or from even the most thoughtful gifts at Christmas. JOY only comes from the light ... Christ, the light of the world. When we need JOY, when we seek JOY, when we stumble across JOY ... it’s in Christ, the light of the world. One of my dear friends always prays to “make Christ famous,” and I was reminded of that when reading John’s navigation of these rapid-fire questions from the priests and the Levites. We are the messengers of the JOY that is in the light of God through Christ.

In this book of John, John the Baptizer’s primary role is to be a very human witness to the light that will save the world. God is about ordering a new creation, a new presence of light in the world but sometimes, actually quite often, we need a fellow human to point to the presence of that LIGHT, otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it. That human can be each of us. What we can begin to understand, in our purpose at ‘testifier’ is the closeness of Christ within us ... whispering in our ears and slipping wisdom into our hearts. We can feel the urge for JOY, and Isaiah points us to trust those instincts... just do it ... be a channel for the joy of God ... even to those who do not ask for it because they’re just too tired to ask. Even to those who do not understand it because sometimes they’re just too overwhelmed to seek understanding of anything beyond their sorrow. The joy of God is just what they need to be freed, even for a moment, from the captivity of fear and anxiety. And, as we say ‘they’ ... that other person that needs help .. that needs joy ... perhaps we can

also turn God's JOY on ourselves when we are tired, anxious, fearful, stressed because Christmas is so close and we are not ready!

John says 'REPENT' ... turn in another direction ... find the light and choose it .. choose joy!

In conclusion, I offer a quote from author Jaiya John

Life changes continuously because Love is chasing Itself around the gardens of Creation, laughing at how everything transforms at Its touch. We can be in harmony with this magic show. Why not be the one who thrills at Beauty as It treks from caterpillar, to cocoon, to a carnival of flight? The more joy you show life as it changes, the more life will share its joys with you. Then you too can join Joy as it goes running... wild and in Love.

AMEN

Now we will sing together our hymn of response ... **#126** *On Jordan's bank*