

Advent 3B December 13 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you beloved Saints from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*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 [John the Baptist] said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Let's pray:*

Today's gospel suggests there are two ways of approaching life and God's presence in the world. One way is demonstrated by John. The other way is demonstrated by the priests and Levites. We're either witnesses or interrogators.

John was a witness sent from God. The priests and Levites were interrogators sent by the religious authorities. "Who are you?" they ask John. "Are you Elijah?" "Are you the prophet?" "Why are you baptising?" They know nothing about John nor the one who stands among them. They're in the dark. That's how it is with interrogators. Witnesses, however, are different. They talk about light. They know the light.

John knows who he is and who he's not. He claims neither too much nor too little about himself. That makes him a credible witness. He speaks the truth but he's not the truth. He's illumined but he's not the light. He's the voice of one crying out in the wilderness but he's not the Word of God. Everything about John points to the light and the life of the One who both stands among us and who is coming for us. John, as we know, will stake his life on that One. That's how it is with witnesses. They live and die based on what they've seen, heard, and experienced.

The ultimate difference between witnesses and interrogators is that interrogators demand answers, whereas witnesses offer hope. More than ever our world today needs witnesses of hope. We don't need more answers or explanations from people who don't have a clue. We have enough interrogators. We need to hear "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

John's is the voice of hope. His words echo through the wildernesses of our world and our lives. And it's encouraging to remember that there're others also who witness to this same hope. Prior to John, Mary was proclaiming the greatness of the Lord. She spoke of the One who shows favour to the lowly, offers mercy, and lends the strength of his arm. He fills the hungry with good things and comes to the help of his people.

Before Mary, there was Isaiah. The Lord anointed him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. He spoke about God comforting those who mourn and rebuilding the ruins of their lives. They will be clothed in garments of salvation and wear robes of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10).

John, Mary, Isaiah. Each one, a witness to hope. They look around at the circumstances of their life and world and see a greater reality. They each testify to a life and presence beyond their own. Within each of their voices is the Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God and was God, the Word that became flesh and dwells among us, the Word that enables us to become children of God (John 1). Everything that needs to be said was spoken in that one Word. That Word, that name, that light and life, Jesus, is our ultimate hope.

It's not hard to remember the tragedies and difficulties of your life: the death of a loved one, an illness, an addiction, guilt, the times you were aware that sin had cut you off from God, others, and yourself. Answers and explanations didn't sustain you. How, when, what, or why wasn't what you needed to hear. It was the Word of hope that got you through it all. Hope doesn't make life easy. It makes life possible. Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. He's already here among us - Jesus. The interrogators of the world, however, make it difficult to hear that other voice, the witness of hope. The interrogators clamour and compete for our attention. They often speak the loudest but the voice of hope can never be silenced.

Which voice will you listen to? Which voice will you follow? Those are questions we must answer every day. The reality of humanity is that we're a people of the wilderness. The reality of God is that God is the God of hope. Do we trust the voice of human wilderness or do we trust the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness? The voice we listen to is the voice with which we will speak. We will become either witnesses or interrogators. The choice is ours, every day, every moment.

Hope isn't easy. We must practice hope; rejoicing always despite the pain, praying without ceasing even when we think God isn't listening; giving thanks in all circumstances, though we'd rather be screaming sometimes (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Through regular practice, we become better witnesses and voices of hope.

Interrogators will question the circumstances of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. Are the circumstances right for rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks? Is there reason for those things? They want answers, justifications, and reasons. Witnesses, however, look beyond the circumstances to the God who fills those circumstances. That's hope.

Hope opens our eyes to see the One who is coming. Hope prepares our heart to welcome the One who is already among us. Hope makes straight the way of the Lord. Hope isn't a feeling but an orientation, an attitude, a way of life. Hope is a way of seeing with the eyes of our heart. Hope allows us to recognise and know, Jesus, the Christ, the One already here and not yet here. Hope doesn't change the circumstances of our life, it changes us and our outlook. Hope shines a light so that we will recognise Jesus when he comes. Hope turns darkness into light and illuminates the path from Jesus to our heart. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.