

[Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; Psalm 40; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34]

First impressions can be deceiving. Think of the people who are in your life today and compare your original perception of them with what you know now. Sometimes our initial “take” on someone is off by a little, and sometimes by a lot. A few of my closest friends began as adversaries. They admit they didn’t care much for me either at first meeting. If you can even imagine that!

Dorothy Day treated the destitute and often frightful-seeming persons she encountered with great care and respect because, as she said, you never know when you are entertaining angels unawares. To see the angel in the homeless man or the Madonna in the pregnant girl takes a certain pair of eyes honed by practice, prayer, and regular exposure to the truth.

John the Baptist, as we saw last week, was on a learning curve about Jesus the same as the rest of us. We think of John as having the home-court advantage because he was the prophet connecting the Old and New Testament to announce “the One who is to come.” Since he was the one “preparing the way,” surely he knew all about Who and what was coming! But John was not a comic book hero endowed with superpowers. He was a faithful servant of God straining to hear the Word being spoken in his times. As we strain in our times.

By all accounts, John did have an innate instinct about the presence of the holy. Didn’t he jump in his mother’s womb when Mary of Nazareth, large with child herself, came into view? That sense of the sacred would serve him well. But it was not infallible or immune to human factors like ignorance or doubt.

John makes the admission in today’s Gospel that, although it was his chosen profession to be the forerunner of the Coming One, “I did not know him.” He says these words twice, so that we have no confusion about his meaning. John had no cosmic pipeline making him a mere trader of inside information.

Like all the prophets of Hebrew scripture, he was simply a workhorse in the spiritual life with a career professional’s dedication to looking, listening, and paying attention for the presence of God breaking into time happening all around us in every age. As we look, listen and pay attention for the presence of God.

John hesitates when Jesus presents Himself for Baptism and betrays his reservations again later on while he is under arrest and beginning to wonder if Jesus is the right Messiah. He has no X-ray vision to validate his sense that “Jesus is Lord,” as Paul will later say with complete conviction. It is far easier on the long side of the Resurrection to make that claim. We stand in amazement at John the Baptist, on the short side of salvation history, making his profession of faith before Jesus had frankly done a blessed thing.

We can hypothesize that John’s faith grew from the time he surrendered further to the divine agenda in baptizing Jesus to the day he was prepared to identify him as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God.

In this sense we can consider Isaiah’s prophecy about the one called from the womb to gather Israel back as a preview of John’s ministry as well as that of Jesus. Jesus is “the light to the nations.” The Gospel is quick to distinguish the true light from the lamp bearer. But John’s eagerness to raise the visibility of this light by his own ministry and testimony qualifies him to be a “glorious” servant of God, too.

If Isaiah’s prophecy is a prequel to John and Jesus, then Paul’s ministry is the sequel -- let’s call it Light to the Nations II. Because it’s not the end of the story but only the second episode in what seeks to become a franchise. Paul asserts to the folks at Corinth that he serves at the will of God, no less. Like the Baptist, Paul is an ordinary man “called” to do an extraordinary thing. And he gives his full attention to the task until his consciousness is replaced by Christ-consciousness. Paul’s learning curve was unusually steep, and he raised the light of Christ high enough for the Gentile world to see it.

It is easier for us to profess Jesus as Lord with the testimony of John, the evangelists, and Paul under our belts. We also have 20 centuries of canon and doctrine, liturgy and theology, not to mention the lived example of the saints and martyrs to light our way.

Considering *our* home-court advantage, one might expect our lantern to be raised higher than ever. If Jesus is to be the Light to the Nations, our attentive and devoted participation is required.

Isaiah says the servant people of God will become a “light to the nations.” In what ways do I help others to be sources of goodness and light to the community?

Saint Paul writes that those who belong to the Church are “called to be holy.” What do I understand holiness to mean? What are the practical steps one takes toward holiness? How do I encourage holiness in myself and others?

John the Baptist call Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” How can I promote a greater spirit of self-sacrifice in myself and those with whom I am in contact?

At Mass each week we quote Saint John the Baptist, who said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Because the Gospels were spoken for decades before they were written down, it’s likely that Christians have been repeating these words for more than 2,000 years. He looked at Jesus and saw someone who’d had a radical and deep experience of the Spirit and invited everyone to “Behold!” All these years later, the invitation stands.

In the end, you and I are exactly like John. We have beheld the glory of God in the sacraments, in the sacred Scriptures, in the hungry and thirsty in our midst. And yet we have also suffered the darkness of ecclesial scandal and of a loveless age drunk on power and prestige. We have suffered from illness, sickness and death.

Like John, we can cry out to Jesus, asking Him to identify Himself as the Messiah, to make His presence known not only in signs but in actions. And we can announce the belovedness of the Lamb of God by remaining faithful to Jesus, even in the darkness of our lives. John’s confession, when it has force and when it fumbles, is ours, too! You and I are called to be light to the nations. Hold your lantern high! AMEN!