

John 1: 6-8, 19-28 "Reflecting the Light" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/13/20

In the days when people could still safely gather together in worship, a church presented their annual Christmas pageant. In order to show the splendor of the newborn Savior, an electric lightbulb was hidden in the manger. All the other lights were to be turned off so only the brightness of the manger could be seen, but the boy who controlled the lights got confused and suddenly all the lights went out. The tense moment was broken by a little shepherd's loud whisper, "Hey, you just turned off Jesus." The brilliance of children presenting this timeless story is that we never cease to gather a new perspective from their bright and observant minds. I will forever hear "Away in a Manger" now as a mournful or disturbing song, maybe a song to indicate it is nap time, and I will want to shout, "No, no, no." As we turn to our scripture, it's worthiness in a Christmas program would prompt even the most creative thespian among us to shout, "No, no, no." For one thing, there is no birth story. A Christmas program based on the Fourth Gospel would feature one child, speaking one line, in front of a curtain of black velvet: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." While this might constitute great savings in the costume and props department, it would no doubt leave the audience feeling seasonally shortchanged.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that what we have today is an Advent program. It stars one character without costumes and props who doesn't say a lot, yet the minimalism is both intentional and revealing. This one character is a man sent from God whose name is John. In the other gospels, he is given a designation such as John the Baptist in Matthew, John the baptizer in Mark, or John the son of Zechariah in Luke. But here he is just plain John and the

religious authorities are quite suspicious about this newbie who won't shut up about the light he saw fall to earth and who is baptizing people to help them see that same light, even though he has no license to do so. He is grilled by them as if he is on the witness stand - they want him to say who he is, but all John says is who he is not. He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, he is not the light, not the prophet-like-Moses Israel has been waiting for. Not, not, not, no, no, no. In these verses alone, there is a grand total of 10 "nots," "neithers," and "noes." How often do any of us describe ourselves in the negative? There's a tendency among moderate-to-progressive Christians, especially in this area, to differentiate themselves from more rigid and judgmental folks by describing themselves as "not that kind of Christian." I understand this, but a negative definition cannot describe us in full and in this age of easy labeling, we may be reluctant to explore further.

There is a game show that has had several reboots called "To Tell the Truth," where a panel of three contestants all claim to be the same individual. "My name is... whatever" as all 3 say the same name. Then there are some clues given about this person and the occupation which makes that person so distinctive. The challenge is to see whether the celebrity players can determine, by asking questions, which of the three is the real one. The contestants guard their answers closely. The humor seeps in when the questioners get confused and investigative minds wander off in obscure directions. Thomas Steagald notes that the same thing is going on here – celebrity questioners like priests and Levites sent from the Pharisees are taking turns asking questions and trying to figure out who John really is. John plays it close, of course, saying more about who he is ***not*** than who he ***is*** which only makes the questioners look more silly. In the TV show, announcer Anthony Anderson says, "Will the real so and so please stand

up!” One does, and confusion gives way to clarity. We can imagine the Pharisees secretly wished for a similar outcome.

They can't blame John however for being in the dark. It must have been hard to be John as they pressed him, “Why are you baptizing, if you are a nobody?” John answers, “There is somebody coming after me whom you do not know. The truth is, I don't know either. All I know is that I am not worthy to fiddle with his shoelaces.” There he was, set apart by God to do one single thing in his life – to proclaim the coming one – and yet he didn't even have a name to shout out loud. He didn't know who he was waiting for nor when he was coming. He didn't know whether to watch the sky or the earth. Maybe the one he was waiting for would come in a chariot of fire that no one could miss, but it was also possible that he would come incognito, so that only those who were searching for him would know he had arrived. While living in this unknown, still the authorities tried to put a label on John, to categorize him as something they could define but he utterly escaped him. The net effect of all this unknowingness was that John did not know who he was, either. So instead, he paraphrases the prophet Isaiah saying, “I am the voice... I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.” Until that One came, John's life was one long Advent, a waiting in the dark for the light, a waiting without knowing, waiting for the one thing that would change everything.

In the midst of one of the worst crises in human history with 1.6 million dead globally and more deaths in our country than World War II, waiting in the unknown has never seemed more real to us. This past week, the FDA made available the Pfizer vaccine and the odds are high the same will happen for Moderna. Even those of us who participated in the vaccine trials

do not know what this means for the future. We who received the vaccine can testify to what we experienced over the past 3 months, but that is all we know. So we wait, and human beings are not very good at waiting. Maybe you have noticed that. We prefer to reach out and grasp what we want when we want, either that or cross it off our lists, but the truth is that sometimes it is not visible to be grasped. Maybe it is not ripe yet, like a fig that is still a hard green knot no bigger than a gumball. Or maybe it is still a dream of the future still a long ways off.

As we wait, we have to acknowledge that we are not in charge here. We question who am I? Who are you? We ministers have been confronted with our own crisis of identity and calling. How can we help others when we can't be with them, how can we be the hands and feet of Christ when our hands and feet are in lockdown? How can technology ever be ministry? How can God possibly work in ways never imagined before? And John reminds us, "You are not the Messiah." In a song that is both poignant and a bit cruel, Bob Dylan wrote one version of John's denial, "It ain't me, babe...It ain't me you're looking for." That messianic impulse, that assumed role of rescuer of the other, can become an egoism that diminishes and destroys. We have seen dangerous faith and fierce loyalties placed upon false and flawed messiahs, who have literally brought our nation to its knees, threatening the very fabric upon which our country was founded. So it is John who not only points us away from himself, but also away from ourselves, our egos, methods of operation, and misguided loyalties, and to Jesus, reminding us that the role of Messiah has already been filled. In turn, Jesus points us to becoming engaged in his saving work and mission, deflecting those messianic expectations placed on him and evading that superstar status. It is Jesus who leads us to what is near and

soon, what is stirring in the lives of those to whom God speaks. That is what it means to be a character in the Advent pageant to which John is involved.

John models for us what it means to live and have faith in the midst of the unknown. Faith, by definition, becomes a radical trust in what God is doing, even when the divine mode of operation is far from clear. Even in the wilderness, even without a proper title for himself or a proper name for the coming One, John the Voice goes on testifying to the light. Without costume, props, supporting cast, or a production budget, John survives on the bare minimum of certainty about what God has sent him to do. In the words of Meister Eckhart, God is found in the soul not by adding anything, but by subtracting. In this season of waiting, we subtract all that doesn't point to Jesus and closely hold to that bare hope of God's arrival, sweeping away all the clutter. We might not know what we are waiting for, but we trust that Light will once more come to outweigh the darkness and joy will take center stage.