

December 17, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church – Advent 3

Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

*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.
John 1:6-8*

It's too bad the gospels weren't recorded as audio, because, in the case of today's gospel passage describing the interchange between the priests and Levites and John the Baptist, I think we would hear definite “tone.” The religious leaders' inquiries of John the Baptist were not neutral probes for information, but something more along the lines of, “Who the *hell* are you?” like you might confront a raucous stranger who was crashing your dignified party. They're skeptical, incredulous, maybe even verging on hostile.

The gospel of John, from which we read today, doesn't take the time to describe John the Baptist, but some of the other gospels do. In appearance, he's an oddity: living in the wilderness, clothed in camel skin, eating bugs and whatever else he could scrape together. He speaks plainly and forcefully, bringing people to account for their actions, their old brokenness and urging them to change in preparation for the One who is to come after him, the One he describes as the Light.

He's attracted great crowds, which is likely what caught the attention of the Pharisees who sent the priests and Levites out to see what's what. Who is this guy who's got people flocking to the middle of nowhere to hear him? Who is this guy who's got people rushing into the Jordan river to be baptized in the hope of experiencing transformation and change?

Even though these elite Jewish leaders are pretty much in the back pockets of the occupying Roman force, perhaps they're tired of selling out, and anxious for the signs of a world about to be transformed – by the return of Elijah or another prophet, or (fingers very much crossed) The Messiah. They want to be free of their oppressors, but this John the Baptist character doesn't at all fit the mold of the One they envisioned would free them.

And, in fact, when pressed by his questioners, John the Baptist says, right away, he's not who they were hoping for. He's not the prophet, he's not Elijah, and he's not the Messiah. He's not the One, but a witness. He's not the Light, but someone who can recognize and point to the Light. And though John's answers may have disappointed the priests and Levites, eventually when the One they *are* waiting for – Jesus – does actually come among them, they don't much like the sound and look of him, either. They want a capital-K King, a forceful leader, like Clint Eastwood in a Dirty Harry movie, ready to

kick down doors and knock heads together, and make change – big change – happen now.

John the Baptist tells them that that's not how the change is going to happen when it does. He references the words of the prophet Isaiah, who lays out the *how* of transformation: not by forcefully overthrowing oppressors, but by siding with the oppressed, offering them comfort and dignity. Being a voice of assurance and hope and joy in times when doubt and discouragement overwhelm. As the 19th century abolitionist, Theodore Parker, wrote, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In Isaiah, God promises justice and wholeness and righteousness – but he doesn't promise it quickly.

Earlier this week, I read a blog post by Seth Godin; he's a writer and entrepreneur who comments daily on leadership, on transformation, on how to understand and move people. His post on December 12th said this:

Change, real change, is the result of focused persistence.

It's easy to get a bunch of people sort of excited for a little while.

The challenging part, and the reason that change doesn't happen as often as it should is that we get distracted. Today's urgent is more urgent than yesterday's important.

The concept of breaking news and the crisis of the day proves my point. If the world ended every time Wolf Blitzer implied it would, we would have been toast a long time ago. The organizations that actually change things are the ones that have a time horizon that's longer than 36 hours.

There are very few overnight successes. Very few entrepreneurs, freelancers, non-profits, candidates, spiritual leaders, activists or people in a successful relationship that got there with thunder and lightning. It happens with a drip. ...Drip by drip.

Godin concludes his observations on real change this way:

Keep showing up. If it matters, keep showing up.

The change that the Pharisees and priests and Levites are going for is more like the 36 hour time horizon type. Their urgency is that they want to be free of the constraints of the occupying Roman forces. But the change that Jesus came to usher in,

the change that God promises, is much more important: the banishing of all of the oppressors that hold human beings back – external oppressors, yes, but also the far more powerful and insidious internal oppressors. Fear and doubt, believing the worst of yourself and others, believing that darkness and chaos are permanent states.

Sitting here in the northern hemisphere, in mid-December, where often grey days quickly turn to dark nights at 4:30 in the afternoon, it's easy to give in to belief in the power and permanence of darkness. Five years after 20 children were gunned down at their elementary school in Sandy Hook, Connecticut and still we struggle with how to keep our children safe, it's easy to give in to belief in the power and permanence of fear. As wildfires in California destroy over a quarter-million acres of land and hundreds of homes and displace millions of people, it's easy to give in to belief in the power and permanence of chaos.

And yet, like John the Baptist, we're called to testify to the Light. To point to the Advent candles of hope, peace, joy, and love – with the Christ candle sitting firmly in the center – and remind ourselves and the world that these things which at times seem faint and ephemeral are the only things that can banish the darkness. The lights of hope and peace and joy and love and Jesus are the only antidotes to fear. The lights of hope and peace and joy and love and Jesus are the only counter-balance to chaos.

We are witnesses to those lights, beholders and carriers of the light. Go forth and proclaim the truth that the fearful, chaotic darkness doesn't stand a chance. Drip by drip, flame by flame, change and Light are coming. *Amen.*