

Advent 3 Year B 2020

We are Witnesses

Readings:

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8,19-28

Psalm 126

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord.”

~John 1:23

“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

~John 1:26b-27

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we hear from Isaiah and from John. We identify this John, not as the author of this gospel but as John the Baptist, from Matthew, or John the Baptizer, from Mark, or John, son of Zechariah, as in Luke. Here, John is identified differently.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness...”

And again:

“I am the voice...”

John does not identify by his action, his vocation (baptism), which the Priests and Levites came to investigate. John identifies as something else. John identifies as the voice. The gospel calls him a witness, and John himself calls him the voice.

So for this Sunday, we can call John, “John the witness.”

John the witness lives in the wilderness. John’s wilderness was wild; unstable. This isn’t the wilderness that you go in to go hiking. This is the wilderness that you go into to get killed.

This is the kind of wilderness with prowling lions, no water, unexpected temperatures, poisonous plants. This is the kind of wilderness that reduced an entire people, a nation, to total dependence on God for forty years.

This wilderness is contrasted with Zion; a city that was laid to waste by invaders, a people that was scattered across the Middle East, and called back together to rebuild a nation and a people. They were called out of the wilderness, back to Jerusalem, back to Zion. God spoke for them and brought them together, and still promised more; God has promised a Messiah; a savior; one who will bind up the broken-hearted, one who will restore the fortunes of Zion.

But John the witness isn't reading these scrolls of Isaiah from Jerusalem, outside of the religious establishment, or in the town square.

John's in the wilderness.

I wonder how we experience wilderness today.

Are we in the wilderness, when every trip outside our home threatens our lives?

Are we in the wilderness, when seeing loved ones can bring contagion into their homes and threaten them?

Are we in the wilderness, when public authorities and our friends and neighbors take risks that threaten our own well-being?

Are we in the wilderness, when our consumer culture and our economic security matters equally, if not more, than the rising case count and death toll in our society?

Are we in the wilderness when a person dies every minute from COVID-19?

Where is the LORD?

Make straight the way of the LORD!

John proclaims not himself, but the LORD.

Now John is very clear with us about the things he is not;

He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, he is not the prophet. He is not the one who stands among you, he is not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

John's a witness.

In the next days and weeks, we will move from a season of watching, waiting, and anticipation, to a season of celebration. We will celebrate the birth of our Lord, or the moment where Jesus becomes incarnate, human, made of the same stuff as us that he may redeem our broken hearts and bodies from all that troubles us.

John's role is none of that. He's baptizing, yes, but he's not doing the work. He's not the hope. He stands outside the margins of our society, in the wilderness, and points.

Our calling today is to witness.

We are to witness to the faith, hope and love in Christ. We are to witness to the kingdom of God, which is so unlike the kingdom of consumer culture and powers and principalities that believe they govern this world. We are to witness to the boundless mercy of Christ, who was born into our world that he might take away its sin, our brokenness, and redeem us. We are to make sacrifices of our own wants and desires for the good of our community. We are to hold fast to what is good and we are to abstain from every form of evil.

And we are to witness.

Even in the face of Death, we are to witness.

Just like John, in the final equation, our salvation and hope is out of our hands. We are witness to something so powerful, so other, that it makes no sense to the ways of this world. We are not to save the world through our own action, but to point to the One who already has. We are witnesses to this story, this Gospel, the truth that sets us free.

So as we dwell in the wilderness of COVID-19, we pray: *Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen*