

Third Sunday of Advent-December 17, 2023

Themes for the Day: The third Sunday of Advent emphasizes joy-we often light a pink candle, a colour symbolizing joy. The idea was to give us a pause and some encouragement in our waiting. Happiness might be fleeting, joy is more like hope-It's a constant even as our circumstances change more rapidly and remarkably than weather in our region.

Gospel: John 1:6-28

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. 24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Sermon:

Present day folk called Mandaeans in the Middle East trace their community to John, the one we call John the Baptist. He was such a prominent figure among the faithful that he and others had to go out of his way to say who he was not so we'd hear his message. He's not the light—he will tell you who is. He's not the Messiah either—he will publicly declare that Jesus is Messiah—saying Jesus is Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He's not Elijah. As we read John's Gospel we don't even get stories of him baptizing Jesus which leads one scholar of John's Gospel, Dr. Karoline Lewis to jokingly call him John-Not-the Baptist.

“Dr. Lewis, can we call him John-the-witness instead?”.

If we can get away with that, John-the witness now tells us what he's seen. If we peek ahead in these opening scenes of John's Gospel we learn it's been revealed to John-the-Witness (who does baptize along the way) that he will see God's Spirit rest upon God's chosen one. John witnesses the Spirit rest upon Jesus; a member of John's extended family on his mother's side. Any shock he felt wore off sufficiently for John to publicly declare Jesus as Lamb of God, one who even now stands in our midst.

A man named Andrew heard John's testimony and personally meets Jesus. The next day he brings his brother Simon—the one we know as Peter—to meet Jesus too. So community begins to form around Jesus.

That same community is fractured when Jesus is executed and their witness is stunned silence. Three days after that, another fear and joy addled witness named Mary Magdalene tells Peter, Andrew and the others “I have seen the Lord.”

In what ways does the church echo John's testimony and Mary Magdalene's? How do we recognize God in our midst and point that out to each other and to our community? The church's task may well be like John's—to remember things we are not so we emphasize what we truly are.

The church's struggle might resemble John's...being misunderstood. The church's struggle might be akin to Mary Magdalene's...being ignored or rebuffed or at least being at a loss for words.

This advent as we together wait-expectantly and live expectantly for the light that shines on all people, that waiting together may well be a kind of witnessing too.