

Who Are You?

In the wisdom that is the Gospel Lectionary of the Episcopal Church we hear readings focusing on the person of John the Baptist not once, but 2 times in the 4 Sundays prior to Christmas. Last week, you may recall, the reading was from the very beginning of the oldest gospel, Mark. Mark introduced John as Jesus' messenger baptizing people and preaching in the wilderness make a straight path for the coming of the Lord. This week, the reading is from the very beginning of the LATEST canonical gospel, John.

Oh, by the way, next Sunday is a rare one in the life of the church because that day, the 24th of December starts out being the 4th Sunday of Advent. You'll hear a lot of people say its Christmas Eve, NOT till sundown my Christian friends! On that Sunday morning you'll hear the beautiful story of how Mary came to learn that she was pregnant. By all means don't miss that, so that when you come to one of the Christmas services, either Sunday night at 5 or 7, or on Monday Christmas morning at 10:00 you won't feel like you missed out on anything. These are heavy-duty days for

regular church-goer like yourselves—no Christmas and Easter Episcopalians here, by golly.

But, getting back to John the Baptist—Why in the world would we need to hear about John the Baptist, not once but twice, during Advent? We're all familiar with the beginning of John's Gospel. It starts out with this lovely theologically rich poem dedicated to the coming of God's eternal Word into the world. Even though Jesus' name never appears in the poem, the Evangelist IS talking about Jesus as the embodiment of this eternal Word.

But our writer is SO concerned we get whom he's NOT talking about—he inserts this little prose piece in the middle of his poetry. The prose piece, our Gospel lection you heard this morning, is about John the Baptist. What you didn't hear was the poetry in verses 1 through 5: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life

was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

THEN he starts in with what you heard this morning, “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.” The writer of the 4th Gospel is trying to correct a mistaken understanding that existed back in the day. The mistake was accepting John the Baptist as The One, when, in fact, Jesus was The One.

Years and years after the crucifixion and resurrection we have evidence that there were people who remained staunch devotees of John the Baptist. Paul encountered them in his missionary journeys. We also have evidence that some of John the Baptist’s first disciples weren’t sure if Jesus WAS “The One” and so sent messengers to Jesus saying basically, “Are you the one, or do we wait for another?” So the 4th Gospel goes to great lengths to correct the misconstrued notion that it’s okay to hang your hat with John the Baptist when Jesus is the SON, Jesus is the One.

Okay, so this is fine—but why do we have to be reminded of this today on the 3rd Sunday of Advent? How does John’s Gospel correcting a misplaced 1st Century allegiance to John the Baptist help ME in THIS busy time of year? How does this word from God help reset MY sights on what God is truly doing in the world? How in the world can any of us be helped by being reminded of the truth of the true light coming in the middle of so much darkness? How can Oh I get it. And I’ll bet you do too.

I’ve heard that some people feel stressed this season. I’ve heard that there is a lot to do and not much time to do it. For a lot of people this is their reality, and maybe it’s yours. In the wider conversation our nation, allegedly indivisible, seems to have cracked open along fault lines of culture, class, religion, and partisan identity, creating chasms of mutual incomprehension and disdain. Virtually everything is politicized, from football to wedding cakes—but the truth of the matter is this: “YOU, Christian, have access to a transformed reality.” THAT . . . doesn’t have to be you. We,

the church, should refuse to be a part of the problem and strive to be part of the answer.

How is it that we are part of the answer? It lies in who we ARE at the very core of our being. In our Gospel reading today the religious authorities ask John the Baptist a question that creates a wide opening for us to walk through. They went to John the Baptist and queried this—“Who are you?” Yeh, “Who are you? Like, are you the Messiah, are you Elijah, are you the prophet of the end times? Give us an answer because we have to give an answer to those asking.” It’s a great question isn’t it? Who are you? How would you answer this question? John knew his role—he had an answer . . .do you? How is YOUR witness to the light of Christ? How are you impacting others (much like John the Baptist did) to the point that people are asking, “Who are you?” Really, who are you? It doesn’t matter what your personality is, whether you are the sociable life of the party or the anti-social sad sack hunkering down in a cabin? Who are you? Are you the one who remembers every single person that you need to buy a gift for? Who are you? Are you the one who feels guilty about receiving a Christmas

card from someone knowing they're not you YOUR Christmas Card list? Who are you? Are you the “bah humbug” person? Who are you? Are you just the one who is along for the ride?

John's answer to “Who are you” was simply that he was a voice crying out—not something that anybody was popularly expecting. John's answer was that he was a mouthpiece declaring the truth of the ages—“The Lord is coming, make straight his path!” This begs the question for us today—what is our voice crying out? What are we saying? What is coming out of our mouths? How are we pointing the way to the savior—Who are we being? Who are you? Are we just more of the same, are we just a self-righteous clique who is a part of the problem? Are we more of the “same ole, same ole” who decry the commercialization and over-advertised consumer-driven pomp and circumstance which we see in our consumer-driven society? Or are we a voice of calm and reassurance—“The light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world—get ready for that!” “It may seem dark, and it is, but it's going to start getting lighter longer very soon.” We know this because of who WE are!

I know you've heard about and read about all the different theories of the origin of Christmas—I think the best explanation lies in Emperor Constantine's experience of the pagan celebration of the cult of the unconquered sun. Yeah you didn't need to be TOO smart to notice back in the day that there was a turning point in the shortening of the days in the third week of what we know as December. We recognize this event as the Winter Solstice around December 21—well guess what—If you're keeping track of the length of days and you're really fastidious about it, by about the 4th day after the Solstice (December 25) you would notice, hey, the days ARE actually getting longer—the darkness doesn't win. Light wins. The darkness loses. So when Constantine, a lifelong pagan who celebrated the cult of the unconquered sun his entire life until he became a Christian, was probably doing his daily devotional reading of The Gospel of John one day and saw this thing about how Jesus, the eternal Word of God, was the light coming into the world and the darkness did not overcome it. He's like, "That's it!" That's Christ—he's the creator of the world, coming into the world and bringing

light to the world—that's it. "This would be a great time to celebrate Christ's birth!"

Now, I don't know if that's how it happened or not, but it's something that works for me anyway. But my point is this: The light of the world—This is who YOU are by being a part of this body of Christ. YOU, the church, are the light that the darkness did not and will not overcome. We are the presence in the world that makes this crazy time sane. We, the church, are those who bring peace in a time of rancor. We are the ones just doing that thing we do—being representatives of and testifying to the light. So, who are you? You are the living reminder to the world that hope is real, that God's love is real, that we created human beings are reflections of God's glory. That light is God. Don't let the darkness win—light wins. And we are witnesses to this light—and if we don't witness to it, who will? Who are you? You are. To the only wise God our Savior be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever. Amen.