

“Full of Truth and Grace”

Isaiah 61:1-11; John 1:6-8, 19-20

Advent III

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: God of our dark moments and our darkest nights, shine your light into these words and into our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear what you have for us this day. Amen.

A message appeared on a church sign in New Jersey this week, it read “A long time ago in a Galilee far, far away.”¹ It’s a clever nod to the opening of *The Last Jedi* which hit movie theaters this weekend. It inevitably will be another blockbuster. There are no spoiler alerts here, but I imagine this next addition in the Star Wars dynasty does not disappoint.

A little farther south of Galilee along the Jordan river, but still a long time ago, there was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The character of John does not disappoint either. If you are experiencing a bit of déjà vu with today’s gospel lesson, it’s understandable. The passage this morning circles us back around to last week’s reading from the Gospel of Mark about John the Baptist. Early on in John’s Gospel, however, the author makes sure we see and hear John. Though we don’t hear he is John the Baptist in this text, we know from other gospel accounts that he is a larger-than-life character. He’s

¹ Kingston Presbyterian Church, Kingston, NJ, sign post from Rev. Sharyl Marshall Dixon, the week of the premiere of *The Last Jedi*.

usually a rude interruption to the season of waiting and preparation.

John the Baptist drips with honey and lives with such solidarity with the poor that he wears their clothes and eats their food. He is unwashed, uncivilized, uncompromising and discomfoting. And he's a crowd magnet. Inevitably, he finds himself surrounded by people wanting to know more---and wanting to know more about him.

Into every Advent season, this unlikely character shows up to disrupt our journey. John keeps showing up year after year. One thing is sure, we cannot get to Bethlehem without hearing from John the Baptist.

John comes to testify to the light. When questioned by the priests and Levites about his authority, John does not hesitate to be the truth teller. John doesn't just reflect the words of the prophets of old. Here, he swallows those words like the locusts he eats and washes down with honey and he spits out the undigested locust shells at the authorities. You can't unsee that. You can't unhear his words, because they are so direct. Isaiah's words are on John's own lips, "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness."

This sharp reminder is that John knows who he is. He knows exactly who he is. He knows he is not the Messiah, not Elijah,

nor the anticipated prophet. He knows he comes from Elizabeth and Zechariah, but with his words he also claims the lineage of those who come from the wilderness; those who come from the margins.

He is courageous. John sent by God. Sent to break through the status quo of the day and to wake up the people to what was to come. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (John 1:7).

To give witness in the first century is risky. It is dangerous to speak up and speak out against the people in power; ruling authorities. It is life and death. John knows that too.

Nevertheless, he persisted. John proclaims a message that confounds those around him. John points to another who would come after him.²

We might think of John is the first century silence breaker. To witness is to break silence. With witness comes risk. There’s a good chance what he said wouldn’t have been believed. Others doubt. Others question his authority or the accuracy of his statements. But to witness, to testify, is to point to the truth. This truth would start the world turning and to let the fires of justice burn.

² I am grateful for the voices of strong women who inspire me and encourage me. Especially today, the courage of Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis who posted her #MeToo moments on www.workingpreacher.org for this week’s lectionary.

What John points to is the earth shattering, life awakening moment of the One who will come among us, as the Gospel writer goes on to say, “true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.... the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 9,14)

John testifies to the Light. John also knows the world he lives in is far from the world God intends. Skip ahead two thousand years, the truth is that the world is far from what we expect it would be. It’s far from the vision that Isaiah saw. There is too much hurt, too much pain, too much violence, too much loneliness in the world.

For many of you, this year is not what you expected. In many ways this year is unprecedented. It may have been filled with disappointment, despair, loss or grief. This year may have been met with unfulfilled promises. This year has been one of anxiety filled news cycles and Twitter attacks, undermining the credibility of institutions that once held our confidence; the feeding frenzies of fake news make us weary.

For others, the year has been about personal growth and challenge with new learning and new skills celebrated. It may have been filled with increasing retirement portfolios because the stock market continues to hit record highs. This year may have been filled with new opportunity for those who never

believed that they could be a voice for change in their work, in politics, in their community. For many across faith traditions, this was a year where the collective voice would always be fueled by faith and not fear, thereby amplifying their voice for justice.

One change sweeping across the country comes with our modern-day Silence Breakers. These women and men named in Time Magazine's Person of the Year edition are "The Silence Breakers." The collective stories of so many have been lifted as voices launched a movement, brought attention and shined light on sexual harassment, misconduct and sexual assault in our culture.

This year, women and men amplified their voices for change. They testified. They testified to the pervasive abhorrent behaviors of people in power over the powerless. No place was left unscathed. From Hollywood to the news media; Wall Street to Main Street, law to medicine; politics to music; the arts to college campuses; the hotel and restaurant industry and farm fields, comedy to business, even the church. The (hashtag) #MeToo became a movement, a reckoning, but it all began with individual acts of courage.³

³ Edward Felsenthal, Editor-in-Chief, Time Magazine, December 18, 2017.

Women and men come as witnesses to testify to harassment, assault or violence that stripped their dignity. They come with courage to speak out against those who have hurt them. They raise awareness to the pervasive culture of sexual violence of any kind anywhere. These women and men come to speak truth. Aware of the risks and no longer able to remain silent they offer their voices. They step forward. One by one they hold a light to shine into the darkest places of their lives. With that light held for another and another and another, they know they are not alone any more.

In a world that is far from the vision Isaiah saw, the words from the prophet this morning ring true. The Prophet says, “God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...” (Isaiah 61: 1-3ff).

I don’t know about you, but I could use some hope right about now. I could use some good news for the oppressed, for the broken hearted, for the fearful, vulnerable and captive. I could use some good news for those who huddle in ruined cities and devastated places. The prophet’s vision seems too

good to be true some days, no matter how badly I want to believe that the Lord who loves justice is on the way.⁴

This poetry of Isaiah resounds with beauty while the world all too often wallows in the ugly. Words like liberty, comfort, gladness, righteousness stand in contrast to all that is going on around us. In a world where the Dictionary.com word of the year was “complicit,” we have our work cut out for us.⁵

In the world we live in, we need the reminders from Isaiah about a world with hope and justice. In a season of preparation and waiting, we need John to keep showing up and pointing us to the one who is to come. Strangely, in this year of all years, John seems to fit right in.

Speaking truth to power (or at least truth to those with ears to hear), John’s proclamation of repentance sounds like the harbinger of good news promised in Isaiah, perhaps now more than ever.

John comes as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. His does this so we will hear the know the man named Jesus and know story of the savior of the world. John points us in the direction of the light. The light of Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth. John makes sure that we

⁴ Jill Duffield, The Presbyterian Outlook, Lectionary post, December 11, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

stop and look up and see what is around us, as we await the one who comes.

If we don't stop and look for that light, we might miss it all together. Not only do we need to look for that light—it matters that we bear witness to the Light that shines in its infinite love and mercy. It also matters that we hold that light for one another.

As we hold the light for one another and we reach for the light of love and mercy, we are strengthened and encouraged in your journey. As light illuminates the darkness, it also drives away our fear and despair.

John came as a witness to testify to the Light that is Jesus Christ,

In that same Light, we feel hope;

In light we see creativity;

In light we recognize the face of our loved ones, our neighbors, and the stranger we do not know yet

In light we find warmth and possibility;

In light we encounter the holy sparks of the sacred within each one of us.⁶

In Light may we be filled with grace and truth.

May it be so!

Amen.

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⁶ The aspiring Rabbi (soon to be ordained) Jessica Shimberg, speaking about light on the first night of Hanukkah, Faith in Public Life event, December 12, 2017, Columbus, Ohio