

December 17, 2017
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent 3
Vicar Jason Ashby

“Advent In The Wilderness”

Here we are on the third Sunday of Advent, and it seems to me that there is something electric about this time of year. The air seems to be filled with it. There’s an underlying current of excitement and expectation anywhere you go.

The word Advent itself captures this to some extent. It’s a Latin word, which simply means ‘coming’, but that seems to be the essence of it. Our excitement and business, our preparations, are all about something that we can feel coming into our lives, something that seems to be partially already here.

For the Church, it’s a time for us to rejoice, and to prepare, but it’s also a time for us to wait and be watchful for a second coming of Jesus into our lives, for a renewed experience of Emmanuel, of God’s presence among us.

But there is also another side to this time of year, a phenomenon which tends to leave us with a rather different set of feelings, feelings of sadness, or loneliness.

For many of us, it’s a season filled with memories of those who have gone ahead of us to be with our Lord, they wait for us in the embrace of Christ, and with time we’ll be together again.

But I also think that for most of us, there can be a feeling of being rushed and even overwhelmed by it all. Whether we’re rushing to get from gathering to gathering, or rushing to finish work, so we can have a few days off.

Rushing to get the cards in the mail, the Christmas tree up, the stockings hung, the food prepared, and the list can go on and on. But there is a weariness in the abundance of things.

And while this business of both mind and body, may or may not speak to your own particular experience, I think it’s apparent that upon the very sacredness of this holy season, a season intended for spiritual preparation, there has been imposed an extraordinary number distractions and stressors.

By forces both scene and unseen, putting great pressure upon us to live up to the expectations of our culture, the expectations of others, and especially the expectations we place upon ourselves. But the good news is we made it to Church this morning. Where we might expect to find a bit of peace and serenity here, perhaps even a much-needed top up of that Christmas spirit.

And yet in our gospel reading this morning, I heard no mention of those blessed shepherds, or little lambs; no Christmas angels, wise men, or blessed Mary, not even a manger, or glimps of the baby Jesus.

Instead we get John... the Baptist. A rebel rouser, and a wildman of sorts, a fellow wearing a camel poncho and eating bugs out in the dessert. Quite the image for Christmas time.

And yet here he is, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. He is a voice that poses a challenge to both the religious culture of our own time, and of his own.

From all accounts, he is an outsider, a sort of hermit, but with one exception. He’s not alone.

The scriptures tell us that the whole country side of Judea and the city of Jerusalem were pouring out into the desert to hear his message. A message proclaiming that a baptism of repentance, is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins.

A message that he must have known would demand a response from the Temple authorities.

Because the Temple already had a system in place for the for getting right with God. The book of Leviticus had laid out a system of very specific rituals and offerings necessary for any Jew wanting to reconcile with God, or their community, or even their family.

Sacrifices, that of course could be purchased through the Temple, processed through the Temple, and the proceeds of which would be used to pay the very officials now sent to question this man in the wilderness, about his very radical proclamation, which if taken up by the people, would essentially render the need for Temple sacrifice redundant.

And so, they come to John, demanding to know by what authority he's making this claim, and even by what authority he is performing this ever so simple but powerful ritual of baptism. Not for profit, or even at cost, but as a gift.

And in some ways, I think I share in the indignance of these Temple officials. Fore here it is now only a week before Christmas, and this John has the impropriety to tell us to repent. To turn back to God and make straight the way of the Lord.

I mean really, who does he think he is, especially at this time of year.

In the midst of our already very busy lives, when we are so obviously focused on preparing for Christmas, preparing to be with our families, trying so hard at times to get into the Christmas spirit.

Who is he, to challenge the way we've always done things.

Have we given him reason to believe that we've turned our focus away from God? Could it appear to him that we've gone astray in some way?

And so, in our defense, and in theirs, the Temple officials just come out with it. Who do you think you are John? Are you the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet?

No, he tells them. I am not the Messiah. I am only a voice crying out in the wilderness.

So, the temple authorities pose a different question. This time not about his identity, or his authority, but about his own ritual practices. "Why then do you baptize John if you are not the Messiah?"

In a way, what I think their saying to him, is what makes what your doing any different from what we're doing, what makes your tradition better or more holy than ours. I think it's a good question.

But his response is key. Especially if we are willing to open ourselves up to taking John's call to repentance seriously, and to try and sort through what this season of Advent and Christmas is really all about for us as Christians.

Now I'm not talking about throwing out the baby or the bathwater, but maybe what John is saying, is that there is a need for us to re-examine where it is that we're putting most of our energy, and to who it is, that we're counting on to make this season holy.

Now, in John's time, most of the religious and cultural practices would put the onus the individual person to approach the holy, to try and approach God, and to make things right with God.

But in our gospel reading, we see John pointing away from himself, and towards Jesus as the one who saves, towards Jesus as the one who approaches us, to make things right and holy. And John's ritual of baptism does the same.

See he acknowledges that it's only a baptism of water, it's not holy in and of itself. Like so much of what we do as Christians, especially during our holiday seasons, what makes John's baptism holy is that it points towards the Holy One of God, the one coming after him, and to the baptism that Jesus will bring upon those who believe, a baptism of the holy spirit.

The tradition that John advocates for here, is one that take the onus off of us, and directs our attention, and our focus, away from ourselves, and towards the saving work of God through Jesus the Messiah.

John shows us that the most important step that we can take in preparing the way of the Lord, is to recognize and confess that we're not Lord. That we're not our own Messiah.

However, like John we can rejoice in this confession, because the one who promises to come again, indeed the one who already dwells among and within us, is greater than us, and he sanctifies us, and he frees us from our bondage to self, and the world around us. It is truly good news.

So, while the voice of John the Baptist may rub a little coarse on a morning such as this, like the hair of a camel shirt, it is a beautiful voice, because it proclaims our freedom, and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

As we go out from here today, on this third Sunday of Advent, let us remember the teaching on these matters given to us this morning by the Apostle Paul. He writes in his letter to the Thessalonians: "Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do all these things" (1 Thes. 5:17-24). The Word of the Lord. Amen.