

Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2020
 “Witnesses to the Light” (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

Our gospel text for today is part of the prologue to John’s gospel. In those verses, John doesn’t call Jesus by name, but refers to him as “the light.” This is an especially appropriate image of our Lord during this Advent and Christmas season. The Light of the World is coming. No wonder the star shone so brightly over Bethlehem. No wonder our Christmas trees are adorned with hundreds of lights. That’s what Christmas is all about – the Light of God coming into our world. And the function of John the Baptist was to point us to that light.

Today, we encounter John the Baptist again, but in a different way than last week where we saw him from Mark’s perspective. Unlike Mark, the fourth gospel tells us nothing about how John dressed, or his peculiar diet, or where he lived. John simply refers to him as a witness: *He came to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but came to testify to the light.* The light, of course, was and is Jesus.

But to fill in from the other gospels, John was out there in the wilderness preaching a message of repentance, calling the people to turn from their sins and get ready because someone special was coming – someone who was from God. John evidently caused quite a stir. Because of his message of the coming messiah, countless people from all over went with much anticipation to see and hear him for themselves. And in anticipation of who was to come, they were baptized.

There were some, however, who were uncomfortable with John and his message. They thought John had gone too far, or perhaps that he was as crazy as he appeared. So, the religious establishment of Jerusalem sends out a delegation to examine him. Not knowing what to make of him because he doesn’t fit the mold of anyone they have ever encountered before, these experts shine a bright flashlight in his face and demand, *Who are you?* Like a good reporter, they want to know if he is credible and, in turn, if his message is credible.

John answers them, not by saying who he is, but by telling them whom he is not: *I am not the messiah.* But they are undeterred and push on: *Are you Elijah?* NO *Are you the prophet?* NO They want to pigeonhole John, to place him within their preconception of how a religious person ought to act – especially one whose father is a priest and who, himself, is a descendant of Aaron and, therefore, considered to be a priest. Furthermore, they want to find a place for him to fit within the context of their hopes for the future of Israel.

Some of them are hoping he might be the prophet Elijah come back from the dead, a prophet through whom God did great works of power. But even if he isn’t the great prophet Elijah, he might be one of the minor prophet who didn’t do all that many powerful works, but certainly had powerful words. And who needed powerful works and words more than Israel, an occupied people with the heel of Rome on their necks? What hope did they have than for some sort of divine deliverance?

So they make another attempt: *Who are you?* What do you say about yourself? But the only thing John will say about himself is *I am the voice. I am the voice that has only one thing to say: the Light is coming.*

The celebration of Advent is the celebration of light coming into our dark world.

A remarkable event took place about 40 years ago in the Gulf of Mexico. Darrel Dore was working on an oil rig when it suddenly began to wobble. Before too long it tipped to one side and crashed into the water. Darrell found himself trapped inside a room on the rig. As the rig sank deeper and deeper into the sea, the lights went out and the room where Darrell was trapped began filling with water. Thrashing around in the darkness Darrell made a life-saving discovery; a huge air bubble was forming in the corner of the room. He kept his head inside that bubble of air and prayed that someone would find him.

As he prayed, Darrel said he felt Christ's presence there with him. For 22 hours, the presence of Christ comforted him, but deep down Darrel knew that the oxygen supply inside the bubble was slowly giving out. Soon he would be dead. Then Darrel saw a tiny star of light shimmering in the pitch-black water. Was it real – or after 22 hours – was he beginning to hallucinate? Darrel squinted his eyes. The light seemed to grow brighter. He squinted again. He wasn't hallucinating. The light was real. It was coming from a helmet of a diver who was coming to rescue him. His nightmare was over. He was saved.

When John wrote his gospel, the world was in darkness and in need of being saved. He wanted the world to know that a light had penetrated that darkness. A Savior had come. John the Baptist came to prepare the world for the coming of the light of Christ. By his own admission, John was not the light, rather he came to bear witness to the light. And it is Jesus to whom he pointed, Jesus, who is the light of the world. That's the good news for this third Sunday in Advent. Just when the world was most dark, when it most needed God's light, a babe was born in Bethlehem of Judea. And, according to a portion of John's prologue that is not part of today's lectionary text, the darkness has not overcome that light. Try as it might, the world cannot extinguish Christ's light.

The light of Christ never stops shining. Through wars, pestilence, famine, good times and bad, that light continues to shine. Our great-grandparents saw its glow in the darkest hour of the depression. Our soldiers saw its glow even on distant battlefields. We see that glow today as we hold on during the final months of a global pandemic. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it – and will not overcome it.

The late John McCain once wrote a story for *Reader's Digest*. It was about the time he spent as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Any of you who know his story know that he was cruelly mistreated in that prison camp. Fortunately, he and the other prisoners were given a little freedom as the time drew closer for them to return home.

This increased freedom made for a very special Christmas. The prisoners were gathered in a dimly lit room with only single bulb. With solemn awareness of where they were and what they had been through, they began to sing *Silent Night* and exchanged crude handmade gifts. John remembers it as his best Christmas ever.

The world cannot extinguish the light of Christ. That light shines in prison camps. It shines in hospital rooms and funeral homes. It shines amidst poverty and every manner of hardship. And it

shines through the long, dark months of a pandemic. Nothing can stop it: not life, nor death, nor powers, nor principalities, nor anything in all creation. Nothing can stop the light of God's love for us from penetrating the darkness. That light cannot be extinguished.

But there's one thing more to be said. One of the greatest privileges we have is to share that light with someone else. John the Baptist didn't just sit around in the wilderness waiting for the Messiah to be revealed. No, he actively called people to repent of their sins, to change their ways, and prepare their hearts for the Savior of the World. He was busy doing the work of God. He was busy bearing witness to the light. That is our job as well.

Even in the midst of what is to be the most wonderful time of the year, the world still cries out in need. The hungry still need food, the naked still need clothing, the sick and imprisoned still need our attention, the poor and downtrodden need justice, and those isolated during this COVID crisis need to know that someone cares.

At the heart of our baptismal calling and at the heart of this season is our call to be the embodiment of the Wonderful Counselor and the Prince of Peace. It is to show the world that the One born in the manger and the One who is to come is truly Emmanuel, God with us. It is to bring the light of Christ into the world of those who live in darkness and despair.

What a great gift we have to offer to someone who might otherwise sit in darkness. What a gift to give someone – the light of Christ – the hope and promise of something greater than ourselves. As followers of Christ, this is our calling: to shine the light of Christ into the lives of those who sit in the deepest darkness.

John was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the light. That light was Christ, who is the life and light of the world. And now we have the same privilege that John the Baptist had. May that well-loved Sunday School song be our mantra – not only during this Advent season – but the whole year long: *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.* May we all let the light of Christ shine through us. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.