

## **We have come to bear witness to the Light**

Advent 3, Year B: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126;

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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*“He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all might come to believe.”*

In the name of God~ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

When I was preparing to wonder with you about today's Gospel reading, a saying popped into my mind that has guided me for quite some time- or at least, I try to remember how much I want it to guide me. It is from a book by Leil Lowndes titled [How to Talk to Anyone: 92 Little Tricks for Big Success in Relationships](#), and it goes like this: “There are two kinds of people in this life: Those who walk into a room and say ‘Well, here I am!’ And then there are those who walk in and say, ‘Ahh, there you are.’” To be someone who comes into a space not to dominate it or overpower it, but to honor instead the other people that we meet there, the stories they tell and their

uniquely gifts and growing edges: I think this is profoundly important to living a God-centered life, because when we do this that we point the way towards God and God's action in the world, not back towards ourselves.

As we did last week, today we meet John the Baptist (as he is known in Mark's Gospel) serving as our model and our guide, but in a very different way than in last week's story. The John of John's Gospel, as opposed to in Mark's, is never called the Baptizer- rather, this is John the Testifier, John the Witness. His primary role, his truest calling, is not only to baptize with water in preparation for the baptism with the Spirit that will come, but to testify to the Light coming into the world, to be a very human witness to what in John's Gospel is a cosmic event: The incarnate Word, present with God since before anything else was created, will be known to us and we will behold its glory. God is ordering a new creation

according to God's purposes and it cries out for a human voice to testify to its arrival, its presence, so that we might believe- otherwise, human as we are, we might not understand it or even miss it completely. That human is John, described in language we are familiar with from last week's stories: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

Interestingly, and incredibly important to this story, John is described by the author of this Gospel by what he is not: he is "not that Light, but came as a witness to testify to the Light, so that all might believe through him." Then the lectionary jumps ahead to where John himself is answering the questions posed to him by the priests and Levites: "No, I am not the Messiah; not Elijah, not the prophet." All these statements of who he is not and why he is here are grounded in his connection with Jesus- he can only articulate his identity in relation to Jesus' identity. "I am not this One", he says, "who is among you

and you do not yet know it; I can only prepare the way for you to receive him and all that he will give you that I cannot give. *I can only point the way to him with my life, my actions, my very way of being.*” It is hard to imagine a better statement of how we ourselves are called to be in this world.

John may deny in today’s Gospel that he is “the prophet”, which most likely means he does not want to be confused with a well-known Old Testament prophet of some fame, like Elijah or Isaiah, but he freely borrows their familiar language to claim how his own ministry has long been foretold- a ministry of pointing to the Messiah who is to come- the One whom he is not. John appears in the wilderness and cries out the nearness of the kingdom from the wilderness, and so his message belonged first and foremost to this place, his testimony about Jesus grounded in a specific time and location and longing. It is easy to forget that those we call prophets in our scripture

stories were not primarily doom-sayers of past brokenness or predictors of the future- they were truth tellers of their own living present. And because this was their call, it is ours as well: to testify to where we have seen and known the true Light among us in all the places of darkness and brokenness in our world- to bear witness to what it means to be God's person in these spaces- *to cry out, like John: "I am not that Light, I am only a human being who is longing to tell you about the Light, and how great and wonderful is the One who has come so that we might know this Light for always."*

Now, beloveds, you may not be imagining yourselves as prophets, or testifiers, as John would prefer to be called- surely that is someone else's calling, you say. But I believe you are- that we all are- because our world desperately needs our testimony, our witness- for us to speak and act and live from the place we are right now in the expectancy and hope of where God is calling us to go.

When we cry out from the place where we live- our own neighborhoods and communities, our own places of wilderness- and invite that turning and re-turning towards God's love and mercy that should be at the heart of everything we do- when we proclaim that we are the ones called to do the anointing and healing work of God, **then** we are who we have been created to be: *witnesses whose entire being points the way back towards God, all our focus on God, never on ourselves*. We all need, in every moment of our lives, to know who we are and who we are not: fully known and fully loved, yet in every moment of our lives in sore need of God's bountiful grace and mercy to speedily help and deliver us, as our Collect says, remembering we are not that Light (because God is God and we are not) but called to bring the Light to the world God so loves. It is our work, with God's help, and in the language of today's readings: to shatter injustice- to lift up the meek and lowly- to bring together in peace and harmony and reconciliation those who would destroy each

other- to share the fullness of God's healing, God's comfort, God's liberation from all that would separate us from all the mercy and love of God- to proclaim with joy and gladness all the great things God has done and will continue to do for God's people.

“Rejoice always”, says the apostle Paul in today's epistle. “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And one of my favorite verses in scripture, one that has long guided my own journey: “*The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*”

Testifying to the Light that has come into a world overwhelmed by the darkness all around is hard, and often we are afraid, and very often we wish it was someone else's job. Beloveds, I invite you- I challenge you- to keep on choosing proclamation over silence, hope over despair, light when the darkness appears the thickest. Appear from within your own places of wilderness with the message that needs to be shared by you and you alone, with words that point back to the God who calls you by name and has known you and loved you since before you were created. The world needs you. This place needs you. You are exactly where God needs you to be, and because of you, because of all that our Matthew's community was and is and is yet to be, God's reign is nearer than it ever was before. Testify, my beloveds, testify to the Light- the Light that you have seen at work in your own lives.

**Amen.**