

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said “let there be light” and there was light; and God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. It was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through it, and without it nothing came into being. What has come into being with it was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

John was a man sent by God. We know a few things about John; we heard about him last week and finding him again in the lectionary is a little confusing, *John the Baptist again?* because John isn't the easiest character to deal with, with all of his camel hair clothes and diet of honey-coated locusts. It doesn't help that we're hearing about John the Baptizer here in the *gospel* of John; but we mustn't mistake one for the other, the writer of the gospel for the one who came to prepare the way of the Lord. And this gospel doesn't even call John “the Baptist” or “the baptizer” and deemphasizes his baptismal role (though it is there) and John doesn't baptize Jesus in this gospel account and we begin to wonder *why is he here again?* why are we hearing about John again on this, the third Sunday of Advent?

The short answer is found in verses 6-8: he was sent by God to testify to the light. To testify means to attest or affirm, to point to. John came to point to the light, to show people the light, the light that was to be the way, truth and life for all people, so that all people might believe. He is a *witness* whose purpose was to authenticate or corroborate the light who shined in the darkness, the light who was coming into the world.

The Pharisees came to John. “Who are you?” they asked. Not the messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. *I am*, John said, *the one Isaiah was talking about, the voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord!’* “How can you baptize—by what authority?” they asked. *I am the harbinger, the herald of the light* says John; *therefore I baptize with water; but the light is coming, is even yet among you though you don't know him; I am not worthy to untie his shoes.* John is neither the light nor the word but the witness to the light and the word, the testimony that the darkness is about to be faced with a challenge it cannot overcome.

It is Advent, the third Sunday, we're well on our way to Christmas and a baby in the manger. The herald in that story is an angel; John is no angel but a human being, flesh and blood and bone. But he is a herald, a messenger all the same. John reminds us that we too are flesh and blood messengers, witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. John reminds us that we too are not the messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet, but ones who point the way to the good news.

We will hear the good news from the lips of Jesus: the blind see, the lame walk, the hungry and thirsty are filled, the oppressed find justice. John seeks to prepare us for this good news through a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The things that Jesus describes as the good news are the beginning of the new creation, the birth pangs as Paul calls them; but only through repentance, in the Greek *metanoia* are we able to realize the wholeness that is represented through the new heaven and new earth in yet another John's revelation. Repentance or *metanoia* is a change of direction, a turning around, in other words a taking on a new way of life. That new way of life will lead the human race to a place of wholeness in which all of the things that Jesus speaks about are realized. And we will be saved.

John points us in the direction of salvation by pointing toward the light; but this isn't a salvation for special individuals but a salvation of all humanity. A little later in the first chapter of John's gospel, John the Baptist sees Jesus and calls out: *there he is! The one who will take away the sins of the world!* Not my sins, or any one individual's sins but the sins of the world. John is a witness that in the end the world will be *saved*, the light will overcome the darkness, and the creation that God called into existence in the beginning will be restored and It. Will. Be. Good.

This is what we hope for, long for as human beings. We hope for a time in which there is no more cancer or Alzheimer's disease; no more choosing between electricity and dinner or medicine and dinner; no more fear of the other that causes unnecessary deaths; no more despair or anger over a lost way of life because all life will be complete and perfect. We all have hopes for something better; we don't always agree on what that something better is going to look like but we all hope for the better, the good, the light shining in the darkness that cannot be overcome by the darkness. Most of us anyway want the better and the good and the light not only for ourselves but for everyone, for all people. We want things for ourselves and our families, sure, and those hopes may be very personal; but we all want an end of suffering for all human beings (at least I hope we do.)

In order to realize those hopes, however, we also have to have faith, which is somewhat different than hope. Faith, according to Barbara Brown Taylor, is *radical trust in what God is doing, even when the divine mode of operation is far from clear*. This is where John, the baptizing one, comes in to play by being the pointer, the witness to what God is doing, he *tells* the world around him and us too that the things we hope for can and will come true through repentance and through the One who has come bearing good news.

The repentance piece is important, though, because without it wholeness is not possible. As we saw earlier, repentance is more than just "being sorry" or *confessing* that we've messed up, although that's important; but we must also redirect our way of thinking, of doing, of being in the world. It may be that we have to repent many times throughout our lives (though we only baptize once) but in order to get to wholeness or completeness or perfection we must constantly correct our course, like a ship through the ocean that has nothing to steer by but the stars. If our course is Jesus' good news then our navigation tool is John the Baptist, urging us to correct until our course is perfectly aligned with the course of that good news.

All this means is that we have a hand in bringing creation back to its completeness. Like John we are witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ, the news that the blind will see and the lame will walk without having to go bankrupt, the hungry will not have to choose between food and the light bill, the oppressed will not have to commit suicide or endure cruel and unusual punishment but will receive justice. Along with being witnesses to the good news we work together to make these things possible by not only giving to the poor but by coexisting with them, coming to know them as people and not just problems. We work to make these things possible by being active in our communities in the name of Jesus Christ. We make these things possible when we live a compassionate life regardless of whether those around us appear to be worthy of compassion, offering forgiveness when needed, reconciliation when possible, and comfort wherever it is necessary. Always in the name of Jesus Christ, perhaps not in an 'in your face' kind of way but as ones calling in the wilderness for the world to be prepared, for change is coming. Change is coming, and it will be good. Amen.

