

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Phi. 4:4-7

John 1:19-28

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Any seminary student who has had to work their way through elementary Greek will tell you the fear and trembling of having to ‘sight read’ texts without previous warning—yes, it happens in language study as well as music. Mark’s rustic grammar is like driving over rough and bumpy gravel, and Luke’s finesse and polish leave a person with the recognition their translation will be lacking. When given a free choice the first chapter of John will win almost every time. It follows the rules of grammar and syntax just like in the textbooks, and the vocabulary is easy to remember. However, like so many things in life, this simplicity is deceptive for within it is contained the absolutely soaring vision John gives us of Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God, and nothing that exists has existence apart from its origin in him.” This is the Prologue to the Gospel, and then after this beautiful and unmatched mystical poetry we begin the reading for this Fourth Sunday in Advent. The shift is dramatic.

For just a moment imagine that you are having dinner at a 5-star restaurant with your favorite person. It is the end of a long and productive week and now you enter a time of refreshment. Surrounding you are other diners engaging in joyful conversation in the most tastefully decorated setting. They are all being served the finest cuisine available and one by one you watch as the servers present the fare for the evening at each table. Soft music fills the background, and the wine list is known to be the best in the city. You have told the chef to ‘surprise you’ and your guest with a selection, and now you work to contain your anticipation. At last, your waiter with a bemused smile arrives at the table with covered pallet. It is a surprise indeed!! She pulls off the dome and there it is--a Big Mac and Diet Coke with large fries. Wouldn’t that stand in complete contrast to everything that has come beforehand?

I am not suggesting that John the Baptist is a Big Mac. But the Evangelist has just made a similarly stark and drastic shift. He has flown with unmatched theology about Christ and a sentence later lands us back on earth and in a very human encounter. It is extremely incarnational. John Scotus Erugina suggested that John the Baptist’s fleeting voice is in contrast to the Eternal Word to which he points. There must be something here that is critical for us to hear and see. I believe it is that the one who comes as light and grace and hope once again, prepares his appearance in and through those who confess his true identity. And what if that just happens to be us—his Church? What if the ‘one crying in the wilderness, prepare for the coming Messiah’ now includes his faithful people? John is the forerunner of not only the Christ, but of those who will, like him, bear witness.

We are quite accustomed to hearing John announce the coming of the Kingdom of God in frightful images, as if a hurricane was headed toward us in the middle of the annual Christmas parade. F. Buechner describes him with these words, “John the Baptist didn’t fool around...He subsisted on a starvation diet...wore clothes even the rummage sale people wouldn’t handle, and when he preached it was fire and brimstone every time. The Kingdom was coming alright and if you thought it was going to be pink tea you had better think again...His favorite way of addressing his congregation was as a snake pit”. (You brood of vipers)

But this snapshot does not look like the one we see in the Synoptic Gospels. In fact, the Gospel of John does not identify him with the same adjective, the “Baptizer”, but rather as a “witness to the light”. The threatening energy and bombastic voice are replaced with subtle honesty and insight. There must be something behind this shift of imagery. On rare occasions people we know well and with whom we have spent considerable time suddenly behave, speak, and even look so differently than we are accustomed, that we are inclined to ask, “Do I know you”, or “Who are you”? A normally poorly performing student suddenly makes the honor roll, or a colleague who cannot meet a deadline completes an assignment 2 weeks early. Those in our lesson today sent to question John appear curious, if not downright perplexed as well. As you read this text you almost get the sense they want to say, “Will the real John please stand up” when instead they ask, “Who are you?” The answer they get is a deflection which opens up a whole new direction. They are told not to get caught in mistaken identity or assumptions, and to look for the one who will shake the wilderness by being the very presence of God.

“Are you the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet (Moses)? No. John does not allow mistaken identity, ego, flattery, or a sense of entitlement to block his place as a witness of light in the darkness. Too much is at stake here. A number of years ago I travelled a good bit for another tradition and happened to fly back into Greensboro after a trip. Waiting on the luggage to appear on the conveyor belt, I was approached by a distinguished and tall gentleman who held his hand out in greeting. He spoke as if he knew me and mentioned the name of another clergyman with whom he had me confused. He said he recognized me from a visit to his parish a few weeks earlier. Considering his description of the parish and event I was quite certain I not been there! I tried to explain that perhaps he had me mixed up with another person, but there was no dissuading him. After a few more moments, with a grin that belied his realization, he said, “Well, whoever you are, we enjoyed your visit very much.”

Our Advent journey today first of all tells us not to chase after mistaken identity or expectations. And make no mistake that the people to whom John spoke were looking hard for deliverance-not only politically, but if you read the Psalms and the Prophets they need to be lifted out of their faithlessness and failures—the things that haunt us in the night. Advent asks us to look and listen to John and take our clue from him that the coming messiah will appear in human shoes and human events, BUT in order to rescue the world from the wilderness of sin and desolation. The Church cannot fall prey to false desires or illusory beliefs that we are here to make everyone happy or feel better about life or to support individualistic spiritual quests. There are many who will ask the Church today, “Who are you” or “What can you do for me today to fulfill my misguided dreams”. Our identity is tied up with the one who came to set people free from the tyranny of the ego and from all that separates us from God. The Christ comes in human visage to let us see that true wholeness is found in being connected to God and freeing others from the exile of hopelessness.

Perhaps the second aspect of this Advent pathway is to realize that we, as God’s own people, share in becoming the voice in the wilderness preparing for others to encounter Christ. How often do we engage people who have lost a sense of direction or hope? What is likely at the source of such darkness and pain is dislocation and disconnection. When Paul says in the Epistle today, Rejoice...the Lord is at hand.” there is inherent in his message a reality, and that is this: The joy of the Christian faith and life is its connection to God as the only thing that lasts. I am aware that more often than not, when I feel sadness and despair, it is when I have lost that connection and am wandering in the wilderness trying to repair myself. The Messiah is God’s own message that he

desires to be intimate with us in order to lift us from darkness. God’s desire is to see us whole and therefore joyful.

Sometimes, perhaps most times, such an encounter with God happens when someone else finds a way through the wilderness to stand with us. Did you ever see the movie, *As Good as it Gets*? It stars Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. Nicholson, who as only he can do, plays an irascible character with Obsessive Character Disorder. He is driven by handwashing, locking doors in a particular sequence, and is generally a miserable human being. Each day he goes to the same restaurant, sits at the same table, lays out the silverware in precise order, and selects the same meal. He also seeks the same waitress (Helen Hunt) whom he drives nuts with his behavior. Finally, in a fit of frustration she asks him why he keeps coming in and why he has to have her interact with him. Unanticipated he responds, “Because you make me want to be a better man!” Without realizing it she has become a beacon of light in his darkness. And once that occurs, he becomes the same for a neighbor who beforehand he had treated with contempt. I contend that is what the Church does when we bear witness in the gloom of the lives of people who are lost. We need not be famous and we dare not seek our own glorification, but the power of setting people free by the smallest of actions or presence is crying in the wilderness. Today’s Gospel for Advent calls us to find a bit of ourselves in John.

Matthias Gruenwald, in his work *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, has John the Baptist painted in full array. But as John looks out at the onlooker he has one finger pointed back at the crucified Jesus as if to say, “Not me, but one who frees the world.” May we too join his message. Amen+