“Among you”

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John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 17, 2023

***John 1:6-8, 19-28***

***6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.***

***19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”******21And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. 24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know******, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.***

Last Tuesday afternoon, at our Advent bible study, we read the beginning of the gospel of John out loud. Known as the Prologue to the Gospel of John, it goes like this. **“**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was with God in the beginning. **3**Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4**In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

The first line from today’s scripture reading about John the Baptist testifying to the light is much more profound if we realize that the light John is pointing to is the light of all people on earth. Oh, *that* light! The very light from God that has been from the beginning. Not just daylight. The light from God. This is the light that all of advent has been working toward – today we lit the candle of Joy, next week at 10am we will light the candle of Love, and on Christmas Eve at our 7pm service we will light the candle of this very light that John is testifying to – the Christ candle.

The season of Advent is a build up to that light. We light candles of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love before lighting the Christ candle. Many churches name the candles other things that lead to the light of the Christ candle, some even choosing their own themes, in keeping with their own sense of the season. This year, for example, to point out the living relevance of this ritual of the advent season, many churches did *not* light the candle of Peace. This was to recognize the lack of peace in the contested lands of the middle east. Here are some other examples of Advent themes.

* Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, Light.
* Faith, Hope, Joy, Love, Light.
* Prophecy, Promise, Fulfillment, Faith.
* Expectation, Annunciation, Proclamation, Fulfillment.
* The Patriarchs, The Prophets, John the Baptist, The Virgin Mary.
* The Prophets, The Shepherds, The Virgin Mary, The Magi.
* Hope, Compassion, Presence, Christ

Maybe you can imagine certain scripture passages that might go with each of these emphases. The passages that are chosen by our pre-arranged lectionary present us with John the Baptist two times so far for our advent season. The first time was to emphasize *the role* of John the Baptist as a fulfillment of ancient scripture. Today we hear from John himself, who he says he is. I wonder if this scripture reminds any of us of the questions Jesus also received later – Who are you? By what authority do you do these things? Jesus’ question to his disciples later, Who do you say that I am? Much like Jesus' questions, John here answers some of the same questions of the Jewish temple priests and Levites and later Pharisees.

First they make some educated guesses since John is acting much like others who had come to bring warnings about the turning of the world. Are you the Messiah? I am not the Messiah. 21And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

John is *like* Elijah, with his words of warning about judgment, and is very much *like* the Prophet preparing the way for the Lord in people’s hearts. “John knows that he is connected to these figures, but is not defined by anyone’s sense of them because he has been sent by God to testify to the light of the world.”1 John was sent with a particular purpose, born with this purpose. In other gospel writings we learn that *before* John was born, his father Zechariah was told by an angel that he would have a son, called John, who would **“…**bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17**And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)

And then *when* John was born, his father Zechariah, sang a song, confirming the message from the angel about who John would be.

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
    for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
**77**to give his people the knowledge of salvation
    through the forgiveness of their sins,
**78**because of the tender mercy of our God,
    by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
**79**to shine on those living in darkness
    and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:76-79)

*Before* John was born, *when* John was born and then *during* John’s life, this God-given mission was clear and was lived through John’s vocation. It’s important to note that even one with such a clear and strong purpose in life, is not immediately recognizable as one to whom we should pay attention.

Those sent from Jerusalem didn’t seem especially suspicious or threatened by John the Baptist. I give them credit for looking for a Messiah, and remembering that there was to be a pre-cursor. Even after they asked John, they seemed to accept his answers about who he was not, but still then remained confused about why he was baptizing. Why are you baptizing if you are not either the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet? They were asking logical questions.

There at the river Jordan, John answered them “Among you stands one who you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”  At first, this reads to me as John the Baptist being his humble self. I read this and hear these words and try to picture someone untying sandals, not a scene that comes to mind often. Right, I think, this is John the Baptist, this is a Christmas story, this is John the Baptist being humble. But this time I read it, and did a double take. Wait – what was that that came before? “Among you stands one who you do not know.” I think of John the Baptist as preparing the way for the Lord – someday, sometime in the future, somewhere else in the area later maybe. But there’s this crowd, following John, wondering what he is about, following his message, and right there, in the crowd, is Jesus. “Pow!”

“Elvis is in the building.”

You mean, right here? John’s message wasn’t that Jesus was *coming* – John’s message was that the messiah *had come*. Is standing among us. That shocks me for some reason. Could you imagine? Next time you’re in a crowd, waiting to cross a street, waiting for a bus, listening to a concert. Consider that right there, right then, among you, is the messiah.

Who is among us that we do not know, that we need to know? What do we pay attention to about people who help us define them?

In our post-resurrection faith where we share a meal recreating Jesus’ last words to his disciples, “do this in remembrance of me” and “until he comes again” we are looking for Jesus to come again. In the places in the world where the kingdom of God does exist, right there among them is the Messiah. The poor, the hungry, the anguished – among you stands one who you do not know. All those people who are Blessed, all those who are among the “least of these” right there, among us stands one who we do not know.

The same guy at the end of my McDonald’s diet coke drive through run – one who I do not know. The family outside the local post office being asked to move along because they’re blocking the sidewalk as they hope for some food donations – among them is one who I do not know. And that’s just my first world scenario. Who in Gaza and Israel is the one standing among them that they do not know? Who in the world who is suffering, does not know that right among them is one they do not know, but who knows them.

As we prepare for the birth of our Lord Jesus, we do so from the perspective of those who have experienced the story already. We know that Jesus was born, we celebrate the recreation of that story now. Inside each Christian lies the joy and innocence of a newborn babe, as well as the horror and terror of the Jesus’ cross. How do we celebrate the babe and the advent season while we live in a world that looks more like Jerusalem of Jesus’ last days?

I think we do that precisely by lighting these familiar candles each year. We remind each other of the hope that Christ brought and does bring to a weary world, once upon a time as well as now. We light the candle of peace as a sign of the peace that surpasses all understanding that only Christ can bring. We light the candle of Joy to remind us of the possibilities of joy ahead of us. As we look to the next week to light the candles of Love and the Christ candle, let us remember that the One whose birth we celebrate may just live right among us.

Let’s pray.

1Harmon, Chelsey, Center for Excellence in Preaching, 12/17/23