

John 1:6-8, 19-28 ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. . . ¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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"Hearts and Lives"

Rev. Amy Terhune

"The late distinguished teacher of preaching, Dr. Fred B. Craddock, used to share that when he would go to various churches for the task of teaching the parables, he would often make up and begin with a modern-day parable, then assign the Sunday School class he was teaching the responsibility of finishing the parable with a conclusion that they deemed appropriate and fitting to our modern setting.

"In a certain church setting he started by stating, "There was a certain man who was very, very, very stingy and the Young Adult Class of the church, not knowing him very well, asked him to play Santa Claus for the Children's Christmas program. In a moment of rare carelessness he agreed to do it. As the time approached he got nervous about it, and the night before the evening of the program he said to his family, 'Why in the world did they ask me to do this " they should know I don't go for this giving-away stuff and Santa Claus and all that!' He fussed around some more and then very seriously asked his family to pray for him so he would do a good job for the children. His family assured him that they were with him and that he would do a marvelous job.

"So he went to the church with his Santa suit on, and IT CAME TO PASS..." Dr. Craddock left the telling right there. The class had to finish the story. How would you finish it?

"This is what the class came up with: ...It came to pass that he went to the church and something happened to him as he got into the role of Santa Claus. Sort of like the Grinch whose heart grew three sizes, or Ebenezer Scrooge, who vowed to keep Christmas in his heart, this man underwent a genuine conversion experience. Before the night was over, he'd written an extremely generous check to the church mission fund. When his family heard about it, they had him evaluated by a psychiatrist.

"Concludes Craddock: "I sometimes wonder...if we truly lived out and followed all the teachings of Jesus, would not someone want to have our heads checked out, too? [5 ¶s adapted from "What Do We Need For Christmas?" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

I don't know if that class came up with an accurate parable for today's world or not. But I do know this: John the Baptist calls us to examine our heads...and our hearts...and our very lives. Why? Because that was his job. He was the voice crying out in the wilderness: straighten up! In John's gospel, there are no shepherds. No angels. No magi. No Mary or Joseph. No Zechariah and Elizabeth. He begins the record of Christ's ministry with a call to the light, and those who witness to its power.

Now, keep in mind that there hasn't been a prophet in Israel in some 300 years, at least. So far as the people know, God's forgotten them. God has been utterly silent. And then all of the sudden, John the Baptist pops up out of nowhere calling for people to prepare for the arrival of God. He creates quite

a stir. People flock to hear him. The powers-that-be want to know who he is. Are you the Messiah? Elijah? A Prophet? To which John responds, essentially, “who I am doesn’t matter. Just listen to the message. One is coming.” And when they don’t listen, he cuts them out of the loop entirely. You want God? Open your hearts; your lives. God will do the rest.

His voice still echoes in the modern wildernesses of our existence—in the wastelands of internet over-stimulation, TV commercials, and holiday buzz. If you want to get to Bethlehem, a travel agent will put you on a plane to Tel Aviv, and then send you down the highway in a bus. But every single one of the gospel writers knows: if you want to get to Bethlehem spiritually, the only way is through the wilderness where John is preaching. And they know this because the wilderness is always where the journey to new life begins. It’s true all over scripture. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, David – all of them find their calling and direction in the wilderness. The people of Israel find their identity as covenant people in the wilderness. Even Jesus will eventually come to terms with his divine purpose in the wilderness.

So John calls us out there into the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord. In other words, get on track, or to put it theologically: repent. Now I know what you’re thinking, because I’ve thought it myself. Repentance is not a very ‘Christmasy’ theme. Who wants to hear about repentance? Leave it for Lent, pastor. Once a year is more than enough. Especially this year. Things are hard enough already! We want a cute baby and shining star and a choir of angels, right? Glory to God in the Highest. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all. But here’s the honest truth, friends. It’s awfully hard to know the joy of Emmanuel, God With Us, if we’ve made no effort to make room for God within us.

“Marty was trying to get her son Billy ready for the church’s annual Christmas program... When he was selected to play a wise man in the program, she decided he would be the best looking wise man in the program. Though she had an impossible holiday schedule, Marty frantically finished making the costume, complete with bushy, fake-fur beard.

“When the pageant was over, the director announced they were trying to establish a new wardrobe closet where costumes could be accumulated for future pageants. Would the children donate their costume? Marty urged Billy to donate his, which he did. Except for the beard, which he continued to wear. Pressing him to hurry so they could go on to the next thing on their schedule, he refused to give it up. Exasperated, Marty tried to pull the elastic bands off from around his ears, but Billy evaded her efforts.

“Mom,” said Billy, “you know those songs in the pageant? I never learned them. With this beard on, I could just move my mouth and nobody knew. I wanna keep it for school, too!”

Thinking of her busy but relatively meaningless schedule, Marty wrote, “That was when it hit me: I was going through the motions of Christmas when I didn’t know the song.” [4 ¶s from Davis Carothers; as used in “The Missing Figure in the Nativity Scene” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Adapted here.]

That was a repentance moment for Marty. She saw her life through a new lens, and it suddenly became clear—she needed to reorient; to refocus; to turn her gaze in a new direction. John invites us to do that.

Leonard Sweet puts it this way: “We think of it like a journey, and thus, we think that means making plans, charting a way, scouting and scoping the landscape, assessing and overcoming obstacles to avoid or override. Sounds like life as usual. Sounds like something we can get our heads and hands and hearts around. Sounds like something we can get down and get done.

“But Advent is not our journey. We’re not in charge. Advent is not a journey we make, a journey we prepare for, a road that we navigate. No, Advent is the journey GOD makes. Advent isn’t a trip we prepare to go on. Advent is the time we prepare for God’s trip to us. Advent is the time we ready ourselves to *receive* God. The God who, against all reason and for our redemption, is making a journey *towards* us. [2 ¶s adapted from “Time to Unpack” by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.]

So rather than prepare for a journey, Advent insists that we recognize our need for God to intervene in the course of our lives and the whole of human history. Now, you may think to yourself: God did intervene in History, becoming fully human and living among us—that’s what happened in a stable in Bethlehem! And you’d be right. But John still cries out across the ages and annals of history because Advent demands that we acknowledge this simple reality: that we still need that intervention. No matter how far our social order may have progressed, we still need Emmanuel—God-with-us. And so John cries out...still...calling us to repent, to humble ourselves, to get our hearts in the right place to accept God’s gift of presence. This advent, let me ask: have we opened ourselves to that message? How is God preparing the way for Christ within our innermost selves?

“In one of her books, Sue Monk Kidd, recalls visiting a monastery. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. As she passed a monk walking outside, she greeted him with, "Merry Christmas." The monk's response caught her off guard a bit. "May Christ be born in you," he replied.

“His words seemed strange and peculiar at the time. What did he mean, "May Christ be born in you?" At the time she was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words. For she discovered that Advent is not only a time of spiritual preparation. It is also a time of transformation. It's "discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart." [2 ¶s adapted from *When The Heart Waits*. Sue Monk Kidd, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990) pp. 181-182.; as used in “May Christ Be Born In You” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

This advent, let me ask: have we opened our hearts to his presence? How is God preparing the way for Christ within our innermost selves?

But let me push that a step further, because John certainly does. How is God preparing the way this Advent not only within you, but through the influence of your life? How is your light shining?

Twenty-five years ago, John H. Townsend wrote a piece for the Minister’s Manual about a pastor in Boston during the 1918 flu epidemic. Faced, as we are, with the reality that they could not gather for worship on Christmas Eve, but without the benefits of live-streaming, “...and burdened by his inability to reach out to people in their time of need, one resourceful pastor thought of the magnificent stained glass windows that graced his church. Those windows faced a major thoroughfare and were large and commanding in design, portraying Christ the Good Shepherd cradling a sheep to his bosom. He had numerous floodlights placed inside the church; illumination through the glass to the outside world gave passers-by the full effect of the windows story. [from Brett Blair, *Sermon Illustrations*; adapted from John H. Townsend in James W. Cox, *The Minister's Manual*: 1995, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994, p. 272.]

Not all of us are called to the same work. But the influence of your life may prepare the way for another this holy season. How is your light shining? Several thousand years ago, God gave us a priceless gift when God gave us Himself. Perhaps the most incredible thing any of us can do this Advent season is to follow that example—to give of ourselves; to let Christ be born in us and shine through us. I opened with Fred Craddock telling a parable that the class had to finish. Let me close in the same manner. But this is not a Fred Craddock parable. This one is mine, and I want you to finish it for me – how this ends is entirely up to you! Here it is:

In the heart of the state of Michigan, there was a city called Saginaw, home to many different kinds of people – all races and faiths, differing political persuasions, the very wealthy and the very poor, and everyone in between. And word came out one December, as the whole country was stuck in the midst of a dire pandemic, that the inmates at the Saginaw County Prison had no access to personal protective equipment – no masks, no hand sanitizer, even a short supply of soap and washcloths – all basic things needed to stay healthy and safe in a time of illness. Some people said, “who cares, they’re criminals. They’re not a priority.” Other people said, “but even criminals are children of God, and no one deserves to get sick! We can help collect that stuff and make sure they get it!” And it came to pass that the people of Saginaw...

Amen.