



Christ Church + Washington Parish

620 G Street SE

Washington, DC 20003

Christ Church is just two and a half blocks south of the Eastern Market Metro station

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The Rev. Martha Wallace ©

3rd Sunday of Advent 2008

Year B Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

Psalms 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8,19-28

Although we don't get to read the first few verses of John's Gospel this morning, you all know how it goes:

You see, we don't have to worry about Christmas. Christmas isn't something we can succeed or fail at. Christmas is already a big success! The Light has already come into the world! The Messiah has opened the doors of the kingdom for us, and we can go on in just as we are, trailing behind us our unfinished Christmas cards, our unbaked cookies, our tears of grief or remorse or loss, our imperfect relationships, our inability to live up to what we think other people want of us, and especially our inability to live up to the expectations we have set for ourselves.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The Gospel writer goes on to describe the Word, calling him also the Light of the world. Then, in the part we read these words this morning, he turns to the man sent to witness to the light, whose name was John. The Gospel writer reiterates that this man, John, is not the light, but merely a witness to it. He is a voice crying in the wilderness.

The Gospel writer wants to be sure that we do not confuse the 'Voice' with the 'Word.' as some people did at the time. Some thought John might be the Messiah. We know that the Gospel writer is talking about John the Baptist who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. However, the people to whom the Baptist first appeared did not have the advantage we have looking back at these events through our Easter eyes across 2000 to tell them who John was - or more specifically - who he wasn't. As we understand it, there were several stories circulating about John and who he might be, and they were based on people's expectations as informed by scripture. In those days, there was a growing consensus that the End Time was near, but there was no consensus about how the End-Time would manifest itself.

Most of the faithful were looking for a Messiah, but what kind of Messiah? The scriptures were unclear. It was possible to claim scriptural support for three different kinds of Messiah. For some the expectation was for a priestly sort of Messiah, who would usher in the reign of God. Still others expected the Messiah to be a new King like David -with all the requisite political power to end the Roman occupation and restore Israel to a position of power and importance. Some thought that first Elijah would return as a kind of forerunner of the Messiah. Still others were looking for one called "the prophet" or more specifically "a prophet like Moses" based on Deuteronomy 18:15. But nobody really knew what to expect.

Characters like John had appeared before, and some of them had reawakened the people's loyalty to God, but many others had led them astray and stirred up insurrection which had gotten the nation into big trouble

with the Romans. The community leaders definitely did not want to upset the tenuous balance with the Roman occupiers, so they dispatched some experts to find out just what was going on. Note that the experts they sent were priests and Levites – religious specialists – just the sort of people who would be best able to judge which, if any, of the potential apocalyptic figures John was and where he fit into God’s scheme of things. They didn’t ask him “What are you doing?” or “What do you hope to accomplish?” They asked him “Who are you?” meaning that if the Day of the Lord really was near, they had some expectations about how that scenario would unfold and they just wanted to know, which role in the drama was his part?

Perhaps John’s reply, “I am not the Messiah” was intended to encourage them to ask, “If you are not the Messiah, then who is?” but they didn’t ask that. They had their checklist of people-expected-at-the-End-Time and if he wasn’t the Messiah then they moved to the next person on the list. “Are you Elijah?” “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” “No.” Finally, they asked him to choose his own words and he said “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” Basically, John pointed beyond himself toward the One who was to come, suggesting that they stop focusing on him, and start focusing on the One for whom he came to prepare the way.

In this season of Advent, the example of John the Baptist is helpful to keep before us as we make ready for the One who comes at Christmas. John reminds us that the focus in this season is not on us or even on our preparations but on the One who is coming the One we are waiting for, the One who is already with us. It is tempting always, but especially at this time of year, to concentrate on ourselves and our own efforts. As many pressures and activities and responsibilities clamor for our attention, how do we redirect our attention to Christ?

This is the time of year when the pressure for a “Perfect Christmas” is something we easily can fall prey to, and that definitely can keep the attention focused on us instead of Christ. John understood who he was in relation to Jesus. I don’t know about you, but for me, knowing who I am in relation to Jesus is harder during the holiday season than at any other time of the year. My calling is muffled by the racket of so many competing ideas: like the idea that I need to create the perfect Christmas for my family, that this will make me happy and will make my family happy. I want - and I feel that I must create- a Christmas that looks like the final scene in *“It’s a Wonderful Life,”* with tears of joy, a family hug beside the Christmas tree, and the whole town caroling in the doorway, with accolades for how wonderful I am as a wife-sister-daughter-priest-neighbor and friend.

I am sure none of you has ever fallen into that trap, but perhaps you fall for another message we sometimes get at this time of year. This cruel message is that, if this holiday is hard for us because we miss someone we love, we should somehow ‘handle it’ or ‘get over it’ and not ruin the festivities for everyone else with our moping. This may lead us to drown our sorrows in alcohol or drugs or withdraw from family and friends because the pressure to deny our grief is everywhere in the buildup for Christmas.

Another message especially for those of us in the church is that if we don’t have the most blessed Christmas ever then it is our fault because we did not ‘do Advent correctly’. Perhaps we were too lax in meditation and prayer, not as faithful in our worship as we should have been. Then we can add a great big case of ‘the guilts’ to our Christmas trauma.

I don’t know about you, but it is things like these that often try to take over my identity at Christmas. What John reminds me of this morning is that I don’t have to fall for any of that, In fact, it is not about me at all. It is God’s faithfulness that is the point, not mine. It is what God has done and is doing and will do that matters, not what I have done, or (more likely, in the case of Christmas, what I have not done.) Advent is not about me. It is not about us. It is about the One who is coming, the One who came and the One who is with

us even now, especially, here at this table. John the Baptist shows up on this third Sunday of Advent, just as we are about to fold under all the holiday pressure, to remind us what all the decorations and festivities are for. He comes to remind us who we are in relation to Jesus.

You see, we don't have to worry about Christmas. Christmas isn't something we can succeed or fail at. Christmas is already a big success! The Light has already come into the world! The Messiah has opened the doors of the kingdom for us, and we can go on in just as we are, trailing behind us our unfinished Christmas cards, our unbaked cookies, our tears of grief or remorse or loss, our imperfect relationships, our inability to live up to what we think other people want of us, and especially our inability to live up to the expectations we have set for ourselves.

John the Baptist directs our attention away from ourselves to the one who is coming - to Christ who came and is still here with us at this table, who accepts us just the way we are. Christ has broken death's power, fulfilling the promises Isaiah spoke of, ushering in a new kingdom where the sound of weeping shall no longer be heard, not because weeping is inappropriate and should be stifled but because God is our comforter, because the source of grief will be made right, because justice will triumph over greed and self-interest and God will rejoice in us and we will rejoice in God.

During this Advent season, that's what we're waiting for and that's what we're getting ready for, that's what we're inviting God to help us see more clearly and share with others, and live into more deeply every day - and really – that's the only Christmas gift we need.