

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thes 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 17, 2017

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John enters our lives again this morning—not as John the Baptizer in last week’s gospel of Mark, not as John the Baptist in Matthew’s gospel, not as John the son of Zechariah as in Luke’s gospel. He’s just plain John—one who came as a witness to testify to the light. He’s not the light. He’s not the Messiah. He’s not Elijah. He’s not a prophet. We hear a string of things that John is not. When he finally says who he is, he responds with the words of Isaiah: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” (John 1:23). Sounds like a repeat of last week and yet here he is “John the Voice” as theologian Barbara Brown Taylor tags him. Meet John the Voice this morning.

Priests and Levites sent by the Pharisees question John about who he is. John’s gospel writer refers to them as the Jews. The Jews in this context were really the establishment of religious leaders in Jerusalem. John’s gospel has been debated by scholars for being anti Semitic, for the writer uses the phrase “the Jews” throughout the gospel. “Who are you?” the religious leaders said. John continued to explain, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” (John 1:26-27). This is John the Voice speaking and witnessing and testifying.

Our sisters and brothers in our Holy Land are especially suffering this year

with the decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. There is potential uproar throughout our Holy Land erupting from that decision. Palestinians see East Jerusalem as the capital of their potential state. A few days ago the mayor of Nazareth was reported to have cancelled all Christmas events including the Christmas market, saying, “Our identity and faith cannot be bargained. The decision has taken away the joy of the holiday, and we will cancel the festivities this year.” What is actually being cancelled are the outdoor singing performances that are part of the Christmas market. So, most of the festivities will continue according to a press conference and the *Jerusalem Post*. At the same time there have been outbursts in the West Bank as we move closer to this most holy time—the time and the one that John the Voice came to witness and to testify. Our sisters and brothers in our Holy Land need our prayers. It was not a peaceful time into which Jesus was born and it continues to be a non-peaceful time into which Jesus’ birth will be celebrated.

John the Voice points to the One who will usher in light into the darkness of our world. John teaches us in his witness how we might use our voice and testify in our time. John knew who he was and who he was not. He was clear about his identity. His witness calls us to be clear about our identity as Christians waiting for the birth of Jesus. How do you testify to the light in your life? How do you embody the light and reveal to others who you really are and who you are not and whose you are?

John the Voice is back in our midst this morning, reminding us to make straight the path of the One who is to come. We must have needed to hear a little more about him and to learn more about ourselves through him.

Let us pray.

O Morning Star, Splendour of Light Eternal,

O Radiant Dawn, O Dayspring from on high,

Shining with glory of the rainbow,

Come and awaken us from the greyness of our apathy,

And renew in us your gift of hope.

O Bright Sun of Justice, Judge of all the world,

Seeking to straighten what is crooked

And put right what is wrong,

Come with dread power and stark mercy to our reluctant hearts.¹ Amen.

¹ Jim Cotter, from "Cries of Advent," in *Prayer in the Morning: A Book for Day's Beginning* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1990), 21,22.