

Sunday, December 17, 2017
Third Sunday of Advent (Year B) and
50th Anniversary of the Consecration of the Church

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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“O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee: grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way... that we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight.” If ever we were wondering what it was we are to be doing in life, and particularly in Advent, there is our mission statement right there. We are to be messengers, preparing the way for Christ’s coming. And really, if we think about it, we are reminded of this all through Advent, not just this morning. I was joking last week that Advent is “messenger season,” since we hear the prophets with their message, and John the Baptist with his message, and the Angel Gabriel with his message to Mary. And all this leads to Jesus, who is much, much more than a mere messenger, but who does, indeed, bear the Message from God to all people, who is the Word spoken through the prophets, the Word made flesh through Mary’s acceptance of Gabriel’s message.

This morning’s Gospel and epistle tell us not only what we are to do, but how we are to do it. Let’s look at the Gospel first, to see what we are to do. Rather than hearing from Mark, as we have done for the past two weeks, this morning we hear from the Gospel of John. We hear that there is a man, John, who was sent from God to be a witness to the Light, so that everyone might believe in the light. Both those ideas are important. John is not the light; he’s the witness to the fact that the light exists. And he’s a witness for a very important reason: so that others can also see the light and believe in it.

Now, notice how he goes about bearing witness. He does it, in large measure, by erasing himself from the equation, and by continually turning focus back to the light. Notice how many times he negates what the religious authorities are saying: No, I’m not the Christ. No, I’m not Elias – or Elijah, as we say today. No, I’m not Isaiah. I’m only the one who cries in the wilderness to point the way; I’m only the one who baptizes with water, to get you ready for the one who will baptize with the Spirit. Every chance he gets, he turns the focus away from himself and back to the one who IS the Light, and who is coming after him.

Notice also that all this negation doesn’t take away from John’s importance. By turning the focus away from himself, he isn’t saying that what he does isn’t important, because of course he deeply believes that it is important. It’s important enough that he’s doing what annoys the religious authorities, going out on his own and baptizing people without their permission. But John understands that his importance lies in his willingness to be the messenger, rather than the message; lies in his ability to keep turning the spotlight elsewhere, rather than keeping it for himself. It is only by effacing himself that he can get people to put their focus where it should be. As he makes room in his life for the coming Light, so he shows others that they should do the same. And we, of course, need to do the same as well; we need to make room in ourselves and around ourselves, so that we don’t metaphorically turn Christ away when he comes because there’s no room in the inn of our hearts and minds and spirits.

Well enough – we have now heard what we are supposed to do. But how are we to do it? The answer to that question is as important as the answer to the question “What are we to do?” Because if we don’t point to the light in a gracious and good fashion, people will ignore us and ignore where we are pointing. And I have to say that going about today in camel’s hair, and eating locusts and wild honey, and shouting on the street corner, is probably not going to get us very far. God knows we hear enough shouting nowadays, from all directions and for a multitude of causes. So what might we do to be effective witnesses in our own time? What can we do that will be as effective in our time as what John did in his?

Luckily, Paul has some good advice for us. It’s good life advice in general, but it’s especially good advice if we want to be effective witnesses to the Light. What does Paul tell us to do? Rejoice constantly. Pray constantly. Give thanks constantly. Listen for the Spirit and do our best to not squelch what the Spirit tells us. Listen for the prophets with an open mind, but also don’t take them at face value; test what we hear and see, and then hold on to what proves true. And run away from what turns out to be evil.

For once, Paul is being straightforward and clear! This is a recipe for doing the best we can as followers of Christ, as messengers of the Light. Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks, heeding the Spirit, and holding on to the truth will stand us all in good stead. And I would add to Paul’s list, “with God’s help,” because we need to remember that we do everything with God’s help. Paul reminds us that God is faithful, and will do for us what we need God to do. We can – and we should – count on that.

So we have this morning some good reminders of what we are to do and how we are to do it. We are reminded that our call is not to be in the spotlight, but to be the ones shining the spotlight where it needs to go. And we are given some tools to keep us in good shape as we seek to do the work we are given to do. The great thing is, these tools and this advice works just as well for communities as it does for individuals. A community which stands as a messenger, which rejoices and prays and gives thanks and listens for the Spirit and listens to the prophets and holds to the truth, is going to be a very effective community. And all we who are here this morning, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of this building, are living proof of that. St. Gregory’s has indeed stood and prospered for more than fifty years by building on the witness of those who have gone before; by looking for missions and ministries that suit the abilities of those who are currently here and those who will come because they see the light through our efforts as messengers.

And I think it is delightful, and fitting, that this anniversary falls in Advent, in the time of preparation; and not just preparation for its own sake, but preparation in order that life abundant can be seen and obtained for ourselves and for others. Our lessons, our history, our very buildings, are reminders of what we are called to do with our lives, both as individuals and as a community. We are called to prepare and keep on preparing; to witness and keep on witnessing; to improve and keep on improving, no matter what season we are in. And to rejoice while we’re doing it.

All of us who come to Advent worship are witnesses, preparing and pointing the way to the one who is to come. Our Advent lessons are reminders that, when done intentionally, prayerfully, and with God’s help, our witness turns us away from preoccupation with ourselves and with worldly

measures of success, and toward not only the Christ who is the focus of our worship, but also the sisters and brothers who are the object of our witnessing. May our celebration of the anniversary of the church's consecration, and our remembrances of those who built this place as a sign and symbol of their witness, reinforce our desire to be witnesses for others, and remind us of all the ways that we can point to the light for the benefit of those who are to come. And may we, by God's grace, always be found "an acceptable people", fit to serve God and each other.

Amen.