

**Sunday, December 13, 2020**  
**Third Sunday of Advent (Year B)**  
Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11; John 1.6-8, 19-28

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/697263334495298>

*(Sermon begins at about 14:00)*

### **“Bearing Witness in Word and Action”**

Déjà vu all over again! Didn't we just hear this Gospel reading last week? Well yes, yes we did. Sort of. Last week we heard Mark's version of the same event: the religious authorities and others going out to see John the Baptist at the River Jordan. Although, today's version from the Gospel according to John is more detailed. Of course, the question could be raised—and I'm sure some of you are thinking it—why didn't the framers of our lectionary pick one or the other? Why have two versions of the same story taking up valuable scriptural real estate in Advent where we only have four Sundays to begin with? That's a good question. And I wish I had a good answer. But I don't. So, this is where we are. This is what we have to work with. And work with it we shall. While we may not be able to explain why we have essentially the same story two weeks running, we can look at this second go-round and see what more we can glean from our friend John the Baptist.

As I said, the version of the story we hear today is far more detailed than the Markan version. Both contain the key element that John is baptizing at the River Jordan. In both versions, his actions and the accompanying message draws the attention of temple officials from Jerusalem. In Mark's version, those attracted from far and wide come precisely because they want to be baptized and have their sins forgiven. In John's version, those who show up are temple authorities who seem to be there on official business. The description of the events we hear today are prefaced with “This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” (Jn 1.19). This is not a bunch of people coming to John for spiritual renewal. This is obviously some sort of official inquiry into John's identity and his actions.

The priests and Levites kept asking who John was. It is unclear as to the purpose behind their line of questioning. When John voluntarily denies being the Messiah, they ask him if he is Elijah. No? How about “the prophet?” Although we do not know precisely who this unnamed prophet is. Nonetheless, John denies being him, as well. His questioners are getting nowhere. They are getting frustrated. They finally say “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (Jn 1.22).

John is very clear as to who he is. And who he is not. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not “the prophet.” Rather, he is, as he puts it, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” While we don't know exactly who the priests and Levites were looking for or who they thought John was, it is becoming apparent that he is not who they are after. But there may still be something worth digging into. After all, John is out in desert, 20 plus miles from Jerusalem, performing baptisms. That has to be something, right? This may well

have been what prompted the inquiry—a strange man performing ritual acts out in the middle of nowhere. Something that had inexplicably drawn the attention of quite a few people. They probably just want to make sure he is not some nutcase. Not some threat to the religious establishment. Interestingly enough, in their line of questioning, in their fear of the potential threat that John the Baptist might pose to the religious establishment in Jerusalem, the priests and Levites are foreshadowing their own dealings with Jesus. Three years down the road, another group of temple authorities—maybe even some of the same ones present at the River Jordan—conduct similar inquiries into who Jesus is. And for similar reasons. Out of fear that Jesus is a threat to their authority.

But that's another story. Back to the inquiry into John the Baptist. When John denies being Messiah, Elijah, or "the prophet," they switch to a new line of questioning. Not about his identity but about his actions. "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" (Jn 1.25). But John sticks with the general subject of who he is and who he is not. "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me" (Jn 1.26-27a).

Again, John is very clear on who he is. He is very clear on who he is not. And he is very clear on what his role is. He is clear that he has been called to this purpose. And he is very clear in his understanding of what that purpose is. Both the Gospel according to Mark and the Gospel according to John have John the Baptist clearly stating that he is preparing the way for one who is to come after him—Jesus. And both place this preparation in the context of baptism. But Mark seems to focus more on John's role as one who performs baptisms. Mark specifically refers to him as "John the baptizer." But in John's Gospel, he is never called "the Baptist" or "the baptizer." This is telling, because in John's Gospel, his role is to be a witness to Jesus. "To witness is an important vocation in John because through witness, the world comes to know the presence of God in Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Based on what he says and the way he says it, John presumably feels that he is called by God to this role as one who bears witness to Jesus and to who Jesus is. He does so in a way that shifts attention away from himself to Jesus. And most importantly, John's witness to who Jesus is will lead others to faith. Will lead others to follow Jesus. Even some of John's own disciples will be moved by what they hear and leave John to follow Jesus.

This is why we spend so much time focusing on John the Baptist during Advent. Because his job is to bear witness to Christ coming into the world. At Christmas, at the end of the ages, and at all points in between. In this, John serves as a model for us in our daily lives and ministries. No, that does not mean that we have to start dressing in camel's hair clothing and eat locusts and wild honey. Okay, that is Mark's version, not John's; but it is burned into our collective memories. It does not mean that we have to go out into the middle of nowhere and do some strange rituals to get people's attention.

Although, what the example of John does tell us is that, if we are doing our jobs right, people will take notice. When people hear the name St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, they will think, "oh, that's the place that does . . . whatever. Feed My Lambs. A food bank. Hosts loads of 12 Step groups. If we are doing our jobs right, what we do by way of ministry will attract the attention of others in the community and make them go, "hmm, what is that about?" It will pique the curiosity, the interest, of those who see what we are doing.

At the very least, those we minister to take notice. Those who receive distributions of food from our Food Bank are always incredibly grateful that we are there to help them. Particularly during this time of pandemic when more people are out of work and in need of a little extra help. Our homeless brothers and sisters who receive sack lunches at Feed My Lambs are incredibly grateful that we are there for them, offering food and a smile and a kind word. Even a little respect and being treated with dignity. Things that are in short supply for these people even during the best of times. And, like John the Baptist, we do our ministry, not for the personal glory. Not for the praise and glory of St. Gregory's. We do it as a tangible expression of Christ's love. As a way of bearing witness to Christ's love in our lives. A love we want to share with others.

This is put in a slightly different way in our Old Testament reading for today, which opens with the words: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Is 61.1-2a). While originally written as an oracle proclaiming God's message of comfort and consolation to the people in Exile, these same words will take on greater meaning when proclaimed by Jesus. As you may recall in Luke's Gospel, at the beginning of his public ministry, after spending 40 days being tempted in the wilderness, Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He is invited to read the Scripture and to preach. He opens the scroll to this section of Isaiah and reads these very words. He then declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4.21). Jesus' self-declaration of his purpose. Of why he came into this world. His mission statement, if you will.

As those who follow Christ, as those who are the Body of Christ in the world, this is our mission statement, as well. Like John the Baptist, our job is to point the way to Christ. John expressed this by referring to himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. We do not live in wilderness in the same sense that John did. But we are living in a wilderness time, nonetheless. A time when the world is more in need of Christ's love than ever before. We are called to continue in the footsteps of John the Baptist to bear witness to Christ.

To echo the words of the Prophet Isaiah, which Jesus himself echoed centuries later. The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon us, because the LORD has anointed us; he has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. This scripture is fulfilled in our hearing and particularly in our doing. And in so doing, Christ's loving presence is made known. Christ's loving presence is made real.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1908.