

Light in December

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 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. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “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.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Today’s account of John the Baptist is rather different from that in last week’s Gospel. In Mark’s Gospel, we encounter John as a wild man coming in from the wilderness clad in camel’s hair, wearing a leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey. Mark seems to emphasize John himself by pointing out how exotic he is.

John's Gospel, by contrast, points more directly to Jesus. The opening verses, you'll recall, are almost otherworldly. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," John writes. "He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."¹

And this is where today's Gospel reading begins: after this *Star Wars* description of light coming into the darkness, John introduces John the Baptist. But notice what he says about John – or, rather what he doesn't say. John's Gospel offers a series of *negative* statements about John the Baptist: he is *not* Elijah; he is *not* the Messiah; he is *not* even a prophet.

John appears to be singular in his focus. John the Baptist is an important figure, yes, but John the Evangelist doesn't want the baptizer to get in the way of Jesus. And John the Baptist himself underscores the point: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

Our celebration of Advent during December is somewhat arbitrary. No one knows exactly when Jesus was born. It may have been December 25 or July 16 or October 11. We don't know. Sometime in the early to mid-fourth century, the Western church designated the celebration of the birth of Jesus as December 25, although most of Eastern Christianity, until very recently, held on to January 6, Epiphany, as the day of celebration, and the Armenian Orthodox Church still clings to that date. The reason for the designation of

¹ John 1:1-5 (ESV).

December 25 as the Feast of the Nativity may have been to coincide roughly with the Winter Solstice. We don't know.

But I like the symbolism of celebrating Christmas in December, the darkest month of the year – at least in the Northern hemisphere. This is the month we see the least light, when the days are shortest. So when John talks about Jesus as the light coming into the darkness, we understand what he means.

It seems to me that we best understand light in the context of total darkness. I remember camping beside a lake in Quético Provincial Park in total darkness, and the utter darkness of the Cascade Mountains in southern Oregon. If you've ever been far away from streetlights out in the wilderness somewhere on an overcast night, you understand darkness. And you know that even the tiniest speck of light can make a world of difference. So it is with Jesus, the light coming into the darkness.

But it also occurs to me that the other way to miss the light is in the context of too much light – and most of it, alas, is artificial light. Streetlamps and shopping malls, Christmas trees and billboards and those television screens that never, ever seem to fade to black. Lights are everywhere, especially in December, which is supposed to be the darkest month.

But it is artificial light, so we must look even more closely for the light of Christ. We struggle sometimes to find Jesus amid the clamor of December. Just as today's Gospel reminds us that John the Baptist himself was *not* Elijah or the Messiah, so we must affirm that Christmas is *not* shopping malls or Frosty the Snowman.

If we look closely, however, if we listen carefully, we can find the light of Christ, the light in the darkness. That is the challenge of Advent,

but it is a challenge well rewarded. As John reminds us, Jesus, the light, came into the darkness, “and the darkness has not overcome it.”

That’s the message of Advent.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut