

“Watching, Waiting, Witnessing”
A Sermon based on John 1:1-28
Rev. Dr. Ruth Ragovin
The Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2020



Longest Night – Service of Light, Winter Solstice 2019
Photo: Donnie Hendrix

First Christian Church
Murray, Kentucky

John 1:1-8, 14-15, 19-28 (New Revised Standard Version)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ... ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ... ¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ 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.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

In the beginning ... That's where John's Gospel locates our Advent story. Not with an angel appearing to a teenaged girl named Mary or a dream that Joseph had. Rather in that cosmic moment beyond all time and all space when God, in a creative act of pure love, spoke the entire universe into existence. The Bible begins in the Book of Genesis with these words: "***In the beginning when God ...***" (Gen 1:1). Our Advent story connects itself with the creation narrative these words: "***In the beginning...***" In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth there was the Word [*Logos*] that simultaneously was with God and was God. This Word is the source of everything that is. John emphasizes that life and light emerged from this Word. This scripture tells us that Jesus is both the pre-existent Word [*Logos*] who was with God at creation, who then becomes incarnated in that little baby boy whose birth we celebrate on Christmas.

From that cosmic perspective in a time and space beyond time and space, our lens zooms in from the vastness of the cosmos and then focuses in closer and closer and closer until we see that area that today is in the greatly contested Palestinian West Bank. Our calendar rapidly scrolls back through over 2,000 years of history. Our camera zooms in a little closer. We catch our breath and realize, in utter amazement, that we are standing at a sacred geographical spot. We are in Bethany across the Jordan. This was the place where the Jewish prophet Elijah ascended back into the heavens (2 Kings 2:11)! We feel compelled by a force beyond ourselves to take off our shoes and walk barefoot, for we are standing on holy ground!

We look around and notice an unusual looking man. We immediately recognize him as one called John because of what the other Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke have said about him. While John's Gospel introduces John (not to be confused with John the author of John's Gospel) in relation to the cosmic origins of the universe described in the first chapter of Genesis, Luke's Gospel locates him spatially and historically as the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 3:2). Matthew says he is "John the Baptist," who was a revival type fire-and-brimstone preacher calling for repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 3:1). Mark describes him as "John the Baptizer" (Mark 1:14). We even learn a little bit from them about how he dressed and what he ate. He appears to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He draws our attention the way the holy men living by the sides of the Ganges river in India do with their utter disregard of things material and their focus on the spiritual realm. John, a strange man, dressed like an ascetic desert dweller, possibly one of the strict Essenes, who shunned the ways of the world to live lives of holiness that, among other things, involved purification rites with water. He was outspoken in his beliefs, oblivious to social norms. His clothing is made of camel's hair,

fastened around his body with a leather belt. John survives on the food he can find in the wilderness: locusts (grasshoppers) and wild honey. Even though locusts may have been a good source of protein, people were probably as shocked then by his diet as we are now.

When we widen our lens back out, we notice people waiting to be dunked under the water by him as they confess their sins and ask for God's forgiveness. We wonder what that is all about, what ways they have fallen short, but then our intellectual curiosity makes room for hearts filling up with compassion. We see a people who are hurting, struggling, impoverished, bereft of hope. This is not an historical time of plenty but a time of want. We overhear people commiserating as they wait in line to be baptized. They are in the grips of a cruel Roman puppet named Herod, an extreme narcissist who cares about little other than his massive building projects. Even though Herod is a Jew, the Jewish people aren't important to him at all. They are but a source of income through taxes, much of which gets passed on to the Romans. They are those upon whose backs Herod's fortresses and walls are built. They suffer during a period of occupation, high taxation, extreme poverty, illness. A period that often is described in the Bible with the word "darkness".

Darkness, here, represents a condition on earth devoid of people embodying God's mercy and justice. People feel lost, perhaps abandoned by God. Many are without hope. And there is good reason that many may have given up on God. Did you know that there are 430 years between the last words in the Book of Malachi of the Hebrew scriptures / Old Testament and the first words of the New Testament? The book of Malachi contains the promise that ***"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."*** (Malachi 3:1) These are words of hope but then they are followed by SILENCE. Not just momentary silence. Rather prophecies cease and the people do not hear the voice of God for the next 430 years. God's people move into a period of watching and waiting ... waiting, waiting, waiting in the darkness for God's light to shine.

Let's pause to get a little perspective on what it means that there are 430 years between the last words of the Old Testament and the first words of the New Testament. If we count back 430 years from the year 2020, we find ourselves in the year 1590. What was going on then? You can google it for specifics and find out fascinating facts like Anne of Denmark is crowned Queen of Scotland; John White, the Governor of Roanoke Island colony, returns from England to find no trace of the colonists he had left there 3

years earlier; or, Pope Urban VII dies 13 days after being chosen as the Pope, making his reign the shortest papacy in history. More generally, speaking from a white western perspective, we find ourselves in the midst of the Protestant Reformation, sparked when Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door. Just imagine all the changes between the Reformation and today: the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment with industrialization, the French Revolution, the American Revolution and the birth of the United States, slavery, the Civil War, the invention of cars and airplanes, the polio vaccine, various World Wars, Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the Spanish flu, the Cold War and the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, the modern and post modern eras, the exploration of space and the first trip to the moon, the invention of the computer, the rise of information technology, the world wide web, social media, globalization, 9-11, climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic. Imagine if through all of this, from 1590 to 2020, there was no prophetic word of hope from God? And yet, between the last words of the Old Testament and the first words of the New Testament, there are 430 years! That is a long time to wait for a word of hope from the Lord! Indeed, we might even think of this historical period that John was living in as a long collective “dark night of the soul.”

Yet, through all this, some people never gave up hope! Parents passed down to their children who then passed onto their children the message that a redeemer will come, a Messiah, a son of David, along with a messenger to announce his arrival. At bedtime, as they looked up at the dark desert sky, perhaps parents would recite these promises to their children from the great prophet Isaiah:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:1-3)*

And when little children would reply that they were tired of waiting for this promised light to shine into their darkness, perhaps their parents might recite this prophecy from Isaiah:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

*³ A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 40:1-5)*

"Wait!" said one of the children, Mariam, to her parents one night when they recited Isaiah's prophesy to her. "Remember yesterday when I went to see my Uncle Mark being baptized by that strange man in the Jordan river over by Bethany. His name was John. He was a holy man. I heard him say something about how he was a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord!"

"Tell us more!" her parents said.

"Well," Miriam continued, "right after he baptized Uncle Mark, these priests and Levites from Jerusalem came up to him and they demanded to know who he was. John confessed to them right away that he was not the Messiah, even though nobody even asked him if he was. So then they asked him 'Who are you?' Are you Elijah? The one who was carried up into the heavens right from this very spot where you are baptizing and the one Malachi told us would return. 'I am not,' he said. And then they sort of asked him in this sarcastic tone of voice: 'Are you one of the prophets?' I'm not really sure who they meant. Moses maybe? But he said 'No.' Then they got super frustrated and demanded that he tell them exactly who he was because they needed to bring an answer back right away to the Pharisees in Jerusalem who had sent them.

And you will never guess what he said! He recited the same words from the prophet Isaiah you just told me. John told those big wigs sent from Jerusalem that ***“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”*** Then they got super confused and maybe even a little bit angry. They asked him: ***“Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?”***²⁶ John answered them, ***“I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”*** They seemed to be telling him he had no right to baptize anyone. But they also seemed worried by him talking about someone coming after him.

Mariam’s parents were shocked. They had goose bumps. Could it possibly be that this man John was telling them that the one they had been watching and waiting for during all those centuries was walking on earth, right near them? How could it be that they could be so fortunate to be alive when the light came into the darkness! John was acting as his witness, telling people to get prepared! To purify their souls by confessing their sins and being baptized so they were ready to meet him!

And now it was Miriam’s turn to ask her parents some questions. She wanted to know what the Messiah was supposed to do. As they tucked her under her blanket in the cold desert air, they said they wanted to share with her yet another passage from the prophet Isaiah that explained what his mission was. He was coming as light into a world of darkness: ***To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;² to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn ...⁸ For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; ... the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*** (Isaiah 61:1-2, 8, 11)

There was a man named John who was sent by God to be a witness to testify to the true light, who was coming into the world. John was not the light. He emphatically stated that he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or even a prophet. He was just ordinary John who wasn’t even worthy to do what slaves in their culture did by tying the sandals of the one whom God had sent. ***(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’” (Jn 1:15)*** John was just a voice crying out in the wilderness for people to prepare their hearts to meet the Lord, who would bring good news to the oppressed and broken hearted.

During Advent we are called, with John, not just to watch and wait but also to witness. Being a witness does not involve us going around in a preacher type voice and telling

people to “believe or perish!” It rather involves our saying “Come and see!” Come and see the light that shines in the darkness! Come and see all the places where God is showing up in the world! There is hope for the future! Like John we are not the Light. When asked by the priests and Levites who we are, we tell them we are not someone the likes of Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Martin Luther King Jr. We are just ordinary people empowered to undertake extraordinary tasks through our identity as God’s beloved children. We are voices bearing witness to God’s true light and all the places it shows up in our world. We also are called to be reflections of God’s life and light and love in our world as we carry God’s light to others who sit in darkness and help light up our world.

During this time of pandemic and unrest, when things can seem so dark and so many suffer from loneliness and despair, especially during the holiday season, we urgently need to bear the light for others. Wendy M. Wright reminds us that ***“it is the vocation of all baptized Christians to become living icons, transparent windows through which the light of divine life pours. This is the ultimate search of human life, to become seers and bearers of that light.”*** (Alive Now, Jan/Feb 2009, back cover)

Therefore, I leave you with these questions and this challenge:

- What are the dark places in your individual life where you need God’s light to shine and enlighten you?
- Where are the dark places in your community that need the witness of God’s light?
- In what practical ways can you carry God’s light to others so that they might experience the hope, peace, joy, and love of God?

And on this third Sunday in Advent, when we yearn for the things that make for hope, peace, and joy, I do so along with the encouragement and promise contained in this beautiful verse from Luke’s Advent story:

⁷⁸ ***By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*** (Luke 1:78-79)

Closing Prayer: Lift my eyes, O God, to your light. Let me arise from my prayers to carry your light into the world. Amen.