

The Testimony of John the Baptist

Sermon: St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena Montana

December 17, 2017

Good morning. We are now celebrating the Third Sunday of Advent as we prepare for the birth of Jesus.

How important it is for us to come aside and worship at such a busy time in order to remember what this holy season is all about. The scriptures we just heard are very rich, so I will say some brief words about them before getting to the gospel from John.

The lesson from Isaiah 61 is one of the most important passages in the bible, because Jesus quotes these verses early in the gospel of Luke. Jesus goes to Nazareth where he was brought up. He enters the synagogue where he would have spent many years and teaches his people about his mission. He has been making quite a name for himself in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee and now comes home to visit the community that raised him. He enters the synagogue and teaches from this passage in Isaiah. He is saying that this passage applies to him and that his mission will have a particular emphasis on bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, bringing liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. At first, his hometown is glad to have their local hero back with them. But when he starts talking about a mission to the marginalized and the left out, they start to reevaluate. Jesus is critical of his hometown for being too comfortable and perhaps too satisfied with themselves. After all, they take some credit for raising Jesus. But they are not ready for his radical mission to the outcaste, so they turn on him and chase him out of the town. A prophet is without honor in his own home town.

But this passage is an essential reminder of the mission of Jesus and the fact that both he and his mission would be rejected three years later when he entered Jerusalem to be crucified.

Next, we read the Song of Zechariah which John the Baptist's father sings after he names his child John. We know this as "The Benedictus". Zechariah, whose name means 'God Remembers', proclaims his joy in learning that God has indeed remembered his holy covenant and through his son, will prepare the way for Jesus.

If you go to Israel, you can visit a church set apart for the birth and naming of John the Baptist. In the courtyard, there are many copies of the Benedictus in languages from all over the world. I want to take a moment to summarize its message.

It is about remembrance and hope. It is about hope based on remembrance. Zechariah is remembering God's faithfulness to his covenant in times past. Because God has always been faithful to his covenant in the past, there is always reason to hope that God will be faithful in the future.

Zechariah says, “God has raised up a mighty savior born of the house of his servant David.

He promised to show mercy to our fathers and to REMEMBER his holy covenant.

The oath he swore to our father Abraham to set us free from our enemies....

You can imagine the joy of Zechariah holding up his son, saying, “You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High.

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

This Benedictus is about remembrance and hope. It is about hope based on remembrance. By remembering the mighty acts of God in the past, we can hope for the mighty acts of God in the future. You cannot have hope in the future of God’s salvation, unless you have a memory of God’s salvation in the past.

I remember the first time I was taught about the relationship between memory and hope. The teacher referred to what he called ‘the rowboat theology’! A rowboat is a rather strange type of vessel. In order to row forward you have to look backward! In order to row straight, you have to stay oriented to a point in the past. You look backward in order to row forward!

This is Zechariah’s reason for hoping in God’s salvation. He remembered that God had saved his people many times in the past. God, who is faithful, all the time, was doing a new thing through his son, John the Baptist by preparing the way for the Savior of the world.

Now we go on to the gospel lesson we heard from the opening chapter of the Gospel of John. It is about the testimony of John. But before I get into that, I want to share with you a wonderful story about trying to understand the Gospel of John.

There is a very famous New Testament scholar named N. T. Wright, who has written many long, scholarly books, some of which I have read over the years. In addition to being one of, if not THE foremost New Testament scholar in the world, he is also an Anglican bishop. His particular specialty is in St. Paul. But in spite of all of his scholarship, he has never written a definitive work on the Gospel of John. So, he was asked at conference, where he was teaching, why is it, Bishop Wright, that you have not written a definitive work on the Gospel of John?

To which Bishop Wright responded, I have not written a large work on the Gospel of John because the Gospel of John is much like my wife! I love her very much, but I do not understand her!!! I share this story with you, not just because my wife is with us today, but also because I approach the gospel from John chosen for today, with a certain amount of fear and trembling!

The verses from the Gospel of John are from the opening chapter, and tell us about John’s testimony. He is not referred to as ‘the Baptist’ but only as John. He came as a witness to

testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. He says very clearly, "I am not the Messiah...I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord. 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's testimony is a lesson for each of us in basic discipleship. Everyone who is baptized is a witness to Jesus Christ. Everyone who is baptized is a testimony to Jesus. I shall never forget a preacher saying to us, you may be the only witness to Christ anyone ever sees!

What are some lessons we can learn from the witness and testimony of John? John says I baptize with water, but one who is mightier than he will come with something far greater. He is talking about Jesus bringing to all, the gift of his Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ is given to us as Christ's own first gift to each of us.

In what we in the Episcopal church call in our Book of Common Prayer, Eucharistic Prayer D, there is a powerful paragraph which reads, '

And, that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us,
He sent the Holy Spirit, his own first gift for those who believe, to complete his work in the world and to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all.

John testifies to Jesus. Jesus brings the gift of the Holy Spirit to His church and to each disciple. Advent is a time when we can ponder the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We should be able to talk about the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives and how God gives of His Spirit to each member of the church to do ministry. Each of us has been given gifts for various ministries which together build up the church. The Holy Spirit gives different gifts to each member of the church to do a variety of ministries.

Yesterday, I was introduced to one of the great saints of this church, who served on the altar guild for years, Rudy Johnson. Your altar guild had a special dedication of Christmas linens in memory of Rudy Johnson. Rudy served on the Altar Guild for many years not only preparing countless services but also training many as members to serve on the altar guild as well. When listening to those on the altar guild describe what her leadership was like, it was obvious Rudy Johnson had a calling for that particular ministry. Having gifts for such a ministry, she used them with joy and commitment.

The altar guild is one of the essential ministries of any church. By the time we show up here on a Sunday morning or a high holy day, the altar guild has come early to do its preparation so we are free to worship. The ministry takes place largely out of sight from the rest of us. This lady tended the altar because she was gifted to do so. She gave to the church out of what she was first given. She was a great example of what it means to know what her vocation was and then used the gifts God gave her for building up this entire community for generations.

Jesus came to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, each one of us has been empowered to do ministry depending on the gifts we have first been given. Each of us has been given a vocation. John had a vocation, Jesus had one and each of us has been given a vocation.

Rudy Johnson knew her vocation and faithfully used the gifts she was given. In doing so she helped the lives around her to flourish. What a splendid example she is for the rest of us. John came as a witness to the Christ who, through the gift of His Holy Spirit, gave each of us our vocation.

Advent is a time when we refocus on Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is a time for us to make room for the Holy Spirit to have its way with us and to pay fresh attention to what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of others. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith