

Testifying to the Light

Third Sunday of Advent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If you were the kind who keeps score, you would note that, so far this Advent season, John the Baptist rates two Gospel lessons devoted to him—last week and this week. Yes, I know the Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent gave us Jesus' words about his second coming at the end of time. And yes, the Gospel for next week, our Fourth Sunday of Advent, will introduce Jesus' mother Mary, who, to my mind, having carried Jesus for nine months in her belly, surely deserves some mention. But John, the man baptizing people at the Jordan River, the one calling people to repent and prepare for the One God was about to send to them—John gets **two** weeks' worth of mention.

Not that John, were he among us here, would even be counting.

That is the striking sense we get from today's Gospel. The lesson appears to be about John, but it's not about John, which John makes clear. It's about the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One from God, who is coming to his people.

In the early '90's, there was a television sit-com called "Dinosaurs," which detailed the life of a dinosaur family in 60 million B.C.—the Sinclair family. The cast included Earl the father, Fran the mother, and their three kids—Robbie, Charlene, and Baby Sinclair. Baby was my favorite. It was obvious Baby was deeply attached to his mother whom he called, naturally, "Ma-ma!" But Baby also had a name for his father. Baby used to hit Earl over the head with a frying pan and call him, "Not-the-Ma-ma!" That was dad's name—"Not-the-Ma-ma!"

Maybe that's the way for us to understand John in our scripture today. John has a name, and it's "**Not-the-Messiah!**" In fact, that's the term John himself uses about himself. When priests and Levites, religious authorities from Jerusalem, journey out to him and ask who he is (and perhaps they ask it more like "Just **who** do you think you **are**?"), he responds by saying, "*I am not the Messiah.*" That's not a defensive posture on his part to save his hide. Because in the final analysis, he doesn't save his hide. (In the other Gospel books we learn the story of his execution by King Herod will be told, his head served on a platter to please Herod's wife and daughter.) John calls himself "**Not-the-Messiah**" because he is not. But he knows someone **is**, that someone is coming, and John has been sent to proclaim that message.

Our Gospel-writer John (no relation to John the Baptist, by the way) gives no real title to John the Baptist. He's not called "John the Baptist" in **this** book, as he is in the other Gospels. He is only called "John." Now, this "John" does the same kinds of things as John the Baptist does in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He does baptize people at the Jordan, call for repentance, proclaim that the powerful and righteous Messiah is coming. Not much different

there. But the “John” in this Gospel—no matter to whom he is speaking, be it religious authorities from Jerusalem or common people—always points away from himself, directs attention away from himself, and instead points and directs everyone to the Christ who is on his way. That is John’s sole role and purpose. That is the reason God sent him. To proclaim the coming of the Messiah for the sake of the world. To, as our Gospel reads, “*testify to the light.*” I find that brief section of our lesson so meaningful: “*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 . . .*” And by “the light,” our Gospel-writer is referring directly to Jesus, who will state later on in this Gospel that he himself is the “light of the world.” John testifies to **that** light.

A different way of expressing this can be found in the book *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* by Rowan Williams. Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury in England. He is the spiritual leader of nearly 100 million folks in our world who are Anglican Christians. Williams writes in this book about the responsibility we have as Christians for making God credible in the world—he calls it a *responsibility for God’s believability*. I think that’s precisely what John (the Baptist) is doing—accepting the responsibility from God for God’s believability in the world. Now, Williams says he owes that phrase, about taking responsibility for God, to Etty Hillesum, who was a Jewish victim of the Holocaust. When Etty was in her early ‘20’s, Nazi Germany occupied her homeland of Holland. Her letters and diaries from 1941 to 1943 indicate how Etty was becoming increasingly aware of God’s purpose for her—this at a time when instead, she could easily have become skeptical of God’s existence and love. Eventually, Etty was imprisoned at Westerbork Concentration Camp, then shipped off to Auschwitz, where she would die in the gas chambers. But in a letter that reached a friend back at Westerbork, she wrote this description of her relationship with God. Her relationship had become, as she wrote, “an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God . . .” She described her growing sense of vocation, that she was called by God, as she wrote, “. . . not simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the heart of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them.” You see, Etty had come to understand that her role, her very person was to be a place where others could somehow connect with God through her. Not because she was exceptionally gifted or wonderful or virtuous or holy. Not because she was famous or important or powerful. Essentially she was “**Not-the-God.**” But she would testify **to** that God. Etty understood she was to witness to God in a place where it seemed as if God’s light couldn’t possibly penetrate the darkness. As Archbishop Williams put it, Etty “had agreed to take responsibility for God’s believability.”

Nearly 2,000 years earlier, John (the Baptist) agreed to take responsibility for God’s believability, too. He agreed to testify to God’s light that was coming into the world that people might believe in God. Not that he presumed himself to be exceptionally virtuous or holy or famous or important or powerful. Yet, like Etty Hillesum in that Nazi death camp, John believed he was sent from God with just that kind of responsibility and purpose.

Will you and I take on the responsibility to witness to God’s believability? Do you and I understand we have a purpose as God’s people—a purpose not only in this place, but in the many places we go? Will you and I agree to testify to the light? Testify to the love God has for all His creation?

You know, we had two “Temple Talks” this morning on important topics—our proposed 2009 budget and our draft mission statement. I recognize that, for some people, listening to two “Temple Talks” in a row this morning was not what they came here for. In fact, some people might even have wondered if the two Temple Talks kind-of “cancelled each other out.” That when you don’t have enough money, and you need to cut the budget, you must stop being the Church and you can’t fulfill its mission. I don’t think so. It seems to me that at times like this it becomes even more imperative that you and I take up the responsibility to witness to God’s believability, to testify to the light of his love as we have come to know that love in Christ. To be the Church. To be the Church first for one another.

We know fellow parishioners who have had their world rocked in the last few weeks. They have been laid off, their positions eliminated, and they are anxiously seeking new jobs in an uncertain economic climate. We have friends in this place whose retirement income, carefully planned for with wise investing, has been reduced to such an extent they cannot pay for the basics, and they fear for their “golden years.” We have brothers and sisters in Christ sitting next to us who, though presently employed, wonder “How long?” and dread the next round of lay-offs or salary cuts.

At the very least, it is our responsibility to witness to God’s believability here with our Christian friends. We must care for each another, not just in showing concern and in praying for each another, but also, where we can, seek to help one another by sharing what we ourselves have, including our time, energy, and resources. Like Ety Hillesum, we must understand that our vocation, our purpose is to be a place where others can somehow **connect** to the God who knows them and does indeed care for them. They need to experience that God through us and our care.

And then we must move **beyond** these Trinity doors. You and I are already well aware of the pressing needs of people throughout our world. Can you and I still find ways to testify to the light for their sake? From the inmates we lead in worship at Dauphin County Prison . . . to the folks who receive our food pantry donations . . . to the neighbors we show daily kindness toward . . . to the grieving with whom we weep . . . to the children who need our nurture . . . to the soldier and his family long separated . . . to the friend coping with illness . . . to the homeless who endure the cold . . . to the individual we know who struggles to believe there even is a God. **It is to them we have been sent.** Frankly, it doesn’t matter how large or small our budget is. It doesn’t matter the precise wording of our mission statement. Those things do not alter the calling of God’s people by God in this place. We are “**Not-the-God**” but we are to testify **to** our God. In the midst of our own individual brokenness, and despite our own congregation’s economic concerns, we are still given a purpose: To point to the light. To announce through our words and deeds the love, mercy, and favor our God offers to all. **AMEN.**