

John 1: 6-8, 19-28
Creekside COB
December 11, 2005
The Third Sunday in Advent

The God We Are Waiting For
The Light in the Darkness God

We are at the halfway point of our Advent pilgrimage, marking the days until we celebrate the decisive moment when God became *one of us* and *one with us*. Over time the church has resisted attempts to hurry things along by turning Advent into an extended, “pre- Christmas celebration.” Someone said that believers must back off the *yuletide throttle*. Our need isn’t speed. It is to know the deeper dimensions of Christmas. To help it find its place in the center of our souls, the church puts speed bumps in our road between November 27 and December 25.

Bump #1 alerts us to the fact that Jesus’ first coming is an installment to his second coming when, “*the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of the Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign forever.*” At bump #2 we ran into John the Baptist calling us to our deaths by baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. It’s a relief to leave him behind, but as we approach bump #3, I have some bad and good news.

First, the bad news. John is back. The good news is he has cooled off since last Sunday. In today’s text he’s a “kinder, gentler” prophet, and is not very talkative. He is waiting for someone. He looks into everyone’s eyes. He figures it is the eyes that will give the Messiah away. “Is that him over there?” “Maybe he’s the one waaaaaay at the back of the baptism line waiting his turn.

There was an annoying comedian back in the 1970’s who responded this way whenever someone called him by his last name. “*Ahh, ya doesn’t has to call me Johnson! You can call me*

RAY, or you can call me JAY, or you can call me JOHNNY or you can call me SONNY, or you can call me RAYJAY, or you can call me RJ... but ya doesn't hafta call me Johnson."

The Greater Jerusalem Ministerial Association heard about John and decided to go listen and ask questions. "Who are you, Mr. Baptist?" I doubt that he said, "Ahh, ya doesn't have to call me, BAPTIST! You can call me John, or you can call me Johnny, or you can call me J.B."

The rumor mill had it that John was the Messiah. When they asked, "Who are you?" he didn't say who he was, but who he wasn't. "I'm not the Christ." "Okay... are you Elijah?" "Nope." "Are you the prophet?" "Nope." They said, "We didn't come all the way out here because we were curious. We've been sent to get some answers, so who are you?"

John quoted a verse from Isaiah. "Who am I? I'm a voice crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord." "Well then, Mr. Voice, just give it to us straight." He replied, "Among you stands someone you don't know." "What is his name?" "I don't know," he said. "Where is he from?" "I don't know." "What does he look like?" "I don't know." "When is he coming—next week, next month, the next millennium?" "I don't know." Their patience was spent. "You don't know much about anything, do you, Mr. Voice?" "I'm just doing my job, getting people ready for when he comes, whenever that may be."

The Pharisees and priests were waiting for the Messiah, too. They were hoping John could shed a little light on their plight. Their world was a very dark place. An anonymous writer captured what it was like when he wrote:

**It was a rugged world...
Men were sold like lobsters to die for other's
amusement.
Rumors of insurrection buzzed in cities and towns.
And at times when walking along the road
One could see the results of mass executions.**

**It was a sordid world...
Of poverty contrasted with opulence,
Of men literally used for fish food while their masters
Considered themselves aristocracy,
Of women degraded, of racial strife and hatreds.**

I have to wonder if all the December emphasis upon good times, good will, and good cheer isn't just a mass injection of Novocain to numb us to the darkness that surrounds us. Pretty as they are, all the Christmas lights in the world are no match for the darkness that will remain after the last bulb goes out.

The verses I quoted have a familiar ring. It is still a rugged world where women and children are sold to make a mint for their masters in the international sex trade. They say it's just a matter of time before we will be hit again by another terrorist attack. Meanwhile the, "war on terror" is creating more terrorists than it can destroy. Mass graves are being excavated in Iraq, Sudan, and Bosnia. We watch Christmas commercials of wives buying their husbands Jaguars and Lexus SUV's with red bows on top while a growing number of families are lucky to get a Christmas basket with enough food to sustain them a few days. Tonight, people will sleep under cardboard while there's a "U-Store-It" on every block to keep all the stuff we can't fit into our houses. Last year, the day after Christmas, a Tsunami killed over 225,000 people, earthquakes have killed thousands more, hurricanes devastated the Gulf coast and exposed the problems of race and poverty that still plague us.

It's *still* dark, and we haven't outgrown our need for the Messiah. John still bears witness to the light of Christ that shines on the problems and perplexities of our lives. The words in your bulletin by Samuel Ryan explain the reason we light candles at Christmas:

**A candle light is a protest at midnight.
It is a non-conformist.
It says to the darkness,
*"I beg to differ."***

John's gospel begins with familiar words, *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world..."* AMEN to that. But here's the puzzling part—the light was in the world, but the world didn't know him. He came to his own people, the people of Israel, and they didn't receive him. How can the light that enlightens everyone not be seen? Go figure.

I have an ongoing debate with a friend. He says he can't stand preachers at Christmas. "How's come?" I asked. "It's always the same—you guys complain about what has become of Christmas with all the merchandizing and crass materialism. You take pot shots at all the schmuck and schmooze and cheap sentimentalism." I reply, "Do you think today's version Christmas is what God had in mind?" "Of course not," he says. "Just give people a break and let them feel good for a change. What's wrong with being nicer to people, or giving money to a guy on the street who asks for it, or being generous for a change? *Even if it makes people better for just a day, don't begrudge it.*"

He's got a point (to a point), but what good is Christmas if it only transforms us for a day? What good is Jesus if he's only king for a day? What good is light if it stays dark the other 364 days of the year? Why bother with it if December 26 everything goes back to normal?

Astronomers tell us there are regions in the universe where there are black holes. The gravitational pull of a black hole is so immense that nothing can resist it and nothing can escape from it, not even light. The unbelief, the cynicism, and hostility of the world are like a black hole to many people. Maybe I'm talking to someone who saw the light, but you have been pulled into a black hole of problems and perplexities and haven't seen the light since. Maybe this is how it is for most of us. Jesus' light comes and goes. We see it for a season, then we don't.

This doesn't mean his light has not come. It certainly has, and it is THE light of the world. But remember, God didn't come as

expected. People expected a grand entrance recognized by everyone. What they got was a humble, almost imperceptible entry and a faint cry behind the inn at Bethlehem. As someone put it, "God comes to us, but usually in the subtlety of events that only obliquely point to the one who stands behind them. God didn't come like a heavenly Mussolini to demand that we see his light."

There was a distraught executive who had hired and fired four personal secretaries in two years. One day he related his frustration to his mother, who listened and then asked, "Did you interview all these people yourself?" "Yes," he replied. She continued, "Did you ask them to sort your mail?" "Why would I do that?" he asked. "Because, my boy, it's the best way to determine priorities. If they put all the bulk mail on top, they don't realize the value of your time. If all the fancy labels land on top, it's an indication that power takes priority over people. But, when you find that one who just naturally places the personal items above all else, you've got the kind of sensitivity you need."

It's a reminder of the intent behind the Incarnation. God didn't overwhelm us with power. He didn't try to get our attention through fancy labels. God did it by becoming as personal as possible. Each Sunday the Advent candles add a little more light to this room. It doesn't seem like much compared with the days of December that grow shorter and the darkness of the world that grows deeper. But it points us to the true light which John said enlightens everyone, and tells of that decisive night when *"in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light."*

Tom Long tells the story of a rabbi named Hugo Gryn who was sent to Auschwitz when he was a little boy. In the midst of this horrible place we can scarcely imagine, the Jews tried to hold on to their religious observances without inciting the guards to make their misery even greater. On a frigid winter night, Hugo's father gathered his family in the barracks to observe the first night of Hanukah, the Feast of Lights. His father took the family's last pad of butter and turned it into a candle with a string from his ragged clothes.

He stuck a match and lit it as Hugo tried to stop him. “That butter is the last food we have! How are we going to survive?” His father replied, “*We can live many days without food, but we cannot live a single moment without hope. This is the light of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere.*”

“And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”