

Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every parent, or grandparent, or anyone who has ever hung out with kids, knows that they have to have a bag of tricks to keep kids amused while waiting. Am I right? Children are bodies in motion. They do not like to be bodies at rest. So we try to distract them in the doctor's office, or in the grocery store line, or in those half-hour amusement park lines.

Back in the day with my two kids, we did a lot of I Spy, or grab a scrap of paper and play Hangman, or tick-tack-toe. But everybody's favorite in our bag of tricks was "the story." The story always started with our own two kids: "*Once there was a little boy and a little girl who lived in a red brick house, and one day . . .*" And together we would come up with these fabulous adventures. They would find a creature hiding under their bed, or they would be transported to a pirate ship. And we'd all add to the story a little as we went.

Well, one time the family was at Disney World in this terribly long line. So I started "the story." "*Once upon a time there was a little girl and a little boy who lived in a red brick house, and one day . . .*" And we kept going, because it was a really long line, we kept building on this story and building. And after awhile I looked around and I noticed everybody around us was hanging on this story. They were dying to see what came next. And we're thinking, "Oh, my, this better be a really good story!"

The Gospel today has a really good story. The Message version of this says, "*Once there was a man, his name was John, and he was sent by God to point the way to the Light.*"

John was a really good storyteller. People around John were hanging on every word. They were enthralled by what he had to say. But John was very clear. "The story isn't about me." They said, "Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?" But John insisted, "The story is not about me. I am not the story."

I think that's a really good line for Advent. "I am not the story." How freeing is that! I think we should all stand up and shout, "I am not the story!" If I don't get my shopping done, or the house never does get decorated, I am not the story. If I am feeling tired, or cranky, or lonely, or overwhelmed, I am not the story! When I hear the news, or read the latest opinion piece, or have somebody tell me about the latest reason the world is coming to an end, that's not the story either. That is not the center of who we are. It is not the story that defines us, gives us purpose, holds us up. I am not the story. You are not the story.

The story is found in the verses that were left unread this morning. I don't know if you noticed, but in the Gospel reading we read a little bit from here and a little bit from there, and we left out a whole lot in the middle. And what is in that section in the middle is this:

"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."

John is not the story. We are not the story. The newspaper is not the story. The story is at the center of who we are, is the story of Jesus both then and now. "*And the Word became flesh and lived.*" This is the story that shapes us. This is the story that gives our lives meaning.

So then, what are we? As they asked John, “Who are you?” What are we? What are our own particular stories, our own particular fears and joys? Do they mean nothing? Are they inconsequential? Should we ignore what’s going on in this world? Should we all kind of have our noses in the Bible story and forget about everything else?

“Who are you, then?” the priests and Levites asked John. What difference do you make if you aren’t the Messiah, or the prophet, or Elijah, or anybody who is important? John replied, “*I am the voice.*” “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.*”

So, you guys know I’m a Bible nerd. Right? I love to find connections in the Bible.

Today John is quoting from the 40th Chapter of Isaiah. And John is quoting Isaiah incorrectly. Actually, he is putting a comma in the wrong place. In Isaiah 40, we read:

“*A voice cries out,*” (comma, quote) “*in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.*” Go out in the wilderness and prepare a way. But when John speaks, he says, “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,*” (comma, quote) “*prepare the way of the Lord.*” This brilliant misquote has to do with the location of the wilderness. Isaiah says, “Go out there and prepare the way of the Lord.” John says, “Don’t go out there and look for God. We are already in the wilderness. Prepare for God where you are.”

In this wilderness of a world, watch for God’s coming. Prepare for God’s coming. God is coming here – where we are. John is not the story. John is the voice. He is the witness to this coming of God. In the same way, we are not the story, but we, too, are voices, witnesses to the coming of God.

So where have you seen God working in this world? Perhaps you prefer to watch for God’s work in the passing of time, in the grand scheme of your life, over time. Or maybe you witnessed God in an incident that happened last week. Maybe you see God in the sky at night, or a day spent in the woods. Maybe you see God’s hand in a challenge to the status quo. Or an insight that hits you like a ton of bricks. Where have you witnessed God at work? Think about that for a minute.

And I want to be clear. John does not say, “I am the eyes in the wilderness.” Or “I am the ears in the wilderness.” He says, “*I am the voice.*” We, too, are the voice speaking in this wilderness.

So, I’m going to ask you to practice being the voice, telling where you have seen God at work. Now, I know you all hate when I do this. But I’m going to ask you to talk – because, honestly, you can’t learn faith by listening to somebody else. You have to do it.

So, I'm going to ask you to find one or two other people sitting around you. You might have to move around a little bit because there are some people sitting alone. But find one or two people, and be the voice.

Tell what you have seen of God's working in this world. Tell what you have seen of God's coming. Tell what you have seen of God's wisdom, or God's grace, or God's challenge, or God's possibilities. Tell a story . Go.

* * * * *

Okay. It's getting a little quiet now, so I'm going to break in. But I do want to encourage you to keep practicing that. Keep talking about where you see God, because there are times we can't, and we need someone else to say, "Well, here is where I saw it." We are not the story, but we are witnesses to the story all around us.

How can you be the voice this week? Maybe someone near you needs hope. Someone might need to be supported in prayer. Someone might just need to hear that there is goodness still in this world, and that there is strength beyond their strength.

Go. You are not the story, but you have a story to tell. You live within it. So go and tell.

Amen.