

## Gospel - John 1: 6-8, 19-28

### Advent 3

Sermon 12.13.20

Fr. Duane Fister



*<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

*<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" <sup>26</sup>John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.*

The priests and Levites ask John the Baptizer, **"WHO ARE YOU?"**

Now I'm pretty certain John the Baptizer did not feel warmly welcomed by the Jewish leaders. When they ask, "Who are you," they are not so much interested in his identity or resume.

"Who are you," by nuance translates more perfectly as, "Just who do you think you are, anyway?"

By the time of John, water baptism was being practiced by any number of different sects as an initiation rite.

On the minds of the priests and Levites were John's qualifying credentials. "Who are you to be able to start up a new movement?"

Even so, John the Baptizer answers them according to their literal question, and he makes three statements about who he is not and one very strong statement about who he is.

- I am not a Messiah come to save you out of Rome.
- I am not some new incarnation of Old Testament Elijah.
- I am not that prophet that some of you look for.
- But I am a voice. Calling out in the wilds. Saying, Prepare a way in your hearts for the Lord God to come to you.

Now that is just the message for us to hear as we feel the pressured wilds of a pandemic close in upon us: Prepare a way in your hearts for the Lord God to come to you. "Let every heart prepare him room." There is still a way we can prepare our heart.

In contrast to our Covid wilderness, John's wilderness allowed for a widespread social contact. All are welcome here. All are welcome to gather and listen. All are welcome to the message of repentance and renewal. All are welcome to the baptismal river, to begin a new, fresh start in the coming reign of God.

The present wilderness that we face is ever so much more a wilderness of isolation and insulation. We say, "All are welcome," but then we must self-exclude. We say, "All may gather," but then the state mandates we are to scatter. "All may eat and drink." But for us the plate is empty and the cup is dry. We hunger and thirst for the presence of Christ conveyed to our senses in bread and wine. But can many of you even remember the last time you were able to receive the blessed host?

One of this season's familiar carols is by Longfellow, and the final two stanzas are these:

*And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
    "For hate is strong,  
    And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"  
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
    The Wrong shall fail,  
    The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

Similarly, it is easy for us to become discouraged or even desperate, when loving God and loving our neighbor means staying away. The loving thing is *not* to expose ourselves and *not* to expose others. That comes at a cost, so it hurts for us to stay away. It's also inconvenient and troublesome to be social only online, and it's not the same as being able to give a gentle touch or a friendly handshake or a loving hug.

Like the bells in the carol, we find ourselves isolated by our own discouragement or despair. But then a louder voice from heaven rings out words of hope resounding both clear and true:

"Prepare a way in your hearts for the Lord your God to come to you." We can still "prepare him room." But how? How are we to prepare him such a room?

Since today's gospel is about baptism, one way to prepare is to remember your baptism. You are not alone. In your baptism he scribed on you his eternal mark that says, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the age's end."

So then would you please now join me in the renewing of our baptism? Let's stand. This is from the BCP, pp. 303-306.

I now present the persons of St David of Wales's congregation who desire to reaffirm their baptismal vows. I will read the questions then instruct you how to respond.

Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil?

If so please answer, "I do." **I do.**

Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?

If so please answer, "I do, and with God's grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord."

**I do, and with God's grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord.**

Will you who today witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?

If so please answer, "We will." **We will.**

We affirm together the Apostles' Creed.

Do you believe in God the Father?

**I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Now all may say or listen together to the Second Article.

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.**

**He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.**

**He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.**

**He descended to the dead.**

**On the third day he rose again.**

**He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.**

**He will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit? All may say or listen together to the Third Article.

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.**

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

All may say, "I will, with God's help." **I will, with God's help.**

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

All may say, "I will, with God's help." **I will, with God's help.**

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

All may say, "I will, with God's help." **I will, with God's help.**

Will you seek to serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

All may say, "I will, with God's help." **I will, with God's help.**

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being and God's creation?

All may say, "I will, with God's help." **I will, with God's help.**

Let us now pray for these persons who have renewed their commitment to Christ. After each petition please say, "Lord, hear our prayer."

Deliver us, O Lord, from the way of sin and death.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Open our hearts to your grace and truth.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Fill us with your holy and life-giving Spirit.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Keep us in the faith and communion of your holy Church.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Teach us to love others in the power of the Spirit.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Send us into the world in witness to your love.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

Bring us to the fullness of your peace and glory.

**Lord, hear our prayer.**

And now I conclude: Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory, who lives and reigns now and for ever. Amen and amen.