

“Who Are You?”

14 December, 2008

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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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.

Prayer.

There was a time when Sabbath travel was frowned upon.

I learned a story of a business traveler from Louisville

On business in St. Louis

Who stayed over until Monday for a return train home.

The snow was flying when he ventured forth from his hotel Sunday morning in search of a place to worship.

Finding a policeman, he asked for the nearest protestant church.

“Why, that one right over there,” he said, pointing with his billy-club.

“Thank you,” the business man said as he turned.

But he stopped and asked, “Why that one, and not any of the other churches?”

The policeman replied, “I’m not a church go-er myself, but I’ve noticed that people coming out of that one seem to be the happiest looking church people in St. Louis.

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I thought that would be the kind of church you'd like to attend."¹

Happiness and Joy!

Advent is a season of Joy!

Each of our scripture lessons for today is sprinkled with joy:

Isaiah exclaims "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord." (Isaiah 61:10)

Mary exclaims "My soul rejoices in my God, my spirit finds joy in God my savior."
(Luke 1:46)

Paul proclaims "Rejoice always!" (1 Thessalonians 5:1)

If the Reformation never happened,

And if the 2nd Vatican Council had not occurred,

Worship this morning would have still used the Latin.

The first words we would have heard today would have been "Gaudete"

Which means, rejoice!²

This is Gaudete Sunday;

And everything about it speaks of JOY!

One of the advantages of doing ministry in both a parish and secular setting
Is that I have one foot squarely in each of the two worlds.

In the Church, this is a season of joy;

In the world, there is a lot of doom and gloom.

Less I soar too high

And become one of those glass is always half-full,

Norman Vincent Peale Power of Positive Thinking type of preachers,

I am grounded everyday

with the reality of everyday people

Fearful for a job

And the ability to put food on the table.

Many economists believe our efforts at slowing the downturn

Are proving to be ineffective,

And that we should prepare ourselves

for a long, sustained economic recession.

Government and education,

Health care and the private sector,

For-profits and not-for-profits alike

all face the prospects of diminished income and growing expenses.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist for all of us to know what that means.

In a world of unsustainable warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan,

Bank of America laying off 35,000 employees,

¹ Paraphrased from Be Joyful. Dynamic Preaching for the Third Sunday of Advent. Copyright 1996 by Seven Worlds Corporation, Knoxville, TN.

² With thanks to Deacon Sil, as found at: <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-ad03sg.php>

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And with Detroit going belly-up, we are told to
 Prepare ourselves?
 What does that mean?

This is what it means to people of faith
 Like you and me
 Who stand squarely with one foot planted in the world
 And one foot planted in the Church:
 We are preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord, thank you!
 Just as Jesus has come, Jesus is coming, and
 - Low and behold -
 Jesus is coming again.
 Our role here today is to
 Not only put food on the table for our family,
 But it is also to,
 Like John,
 Joyfully witness to the fact that Jesus is coming again.

“Who are you?” the religious authorities coming from Jerusalem asked.
 “Who are you?” sounding vaguely reminiscent of the 1970’s band, The Who.
 “Who are you?” asking with a more subtle motive of undermining John’s authority
 in front of his crowds of followers.
 “Who are you baptizing in the wilderness with water and words of repentance?”
 “Are you a prophet, Elijah perhaps? or are you the one, the Messiah?”
 Thank goodness John didn’t take the bait
 Or he would have been beheaded on the spot.
 John is neither.
 He is a witness
 The first witness
 That Jesus is God
 That Jesus is the Word
 That Jesus is the Light
 Who has come to illuminate and lead a world covered in darkness and frolicking in
 sin.
 And John’s authority came directly from God:
 “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” (John 1:6)

Last Sunday,
 I left you with the charge to be the John in today’s world;
 To be the one who points towards the coming Jesus.
 Today’s lesson is an encouragement to further refine that proclamation:
 Just as John was sent to witness
 So too are we sent to witness

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To the fact that
 Jesus is God; Jesus is the Word; and Jesus is the light who comes.³
 Your authority and mine,
 Doesn't come from a visit by Gabriel to your mother or mine.
 Your authority and my authority
 To witness to Jesus
 Comes to us by means of our baptism,
 When, like John baptized Jesus,
 the water parted,
 Repentance is granted,
 the Spirit descends and creates home within the heart.
 Your baptism is your authority to witness
 To the Good News this Advent season.
 Your baptism gives you the right
 To stand up and proclaim your witness,
 And to do so without hesitation or a second thought.

This past week,
 I had the occasion to drive down to Elmira late Wednesday evening.
 Route 390 was dark and my thoughts were of not falling asleep, keeping my eye on
 the road, and my hands on the wheel.
 Midway down, I saw a bright shining star
 High in the sky,
 Small at first,
 Growing ever brighter with every mile that passed.
 For ten minutes or more
 I could see that this bright, shining star had a far deeper meaning than any other
 star in the sky.
 At the first exit for Bath, I could just then plainly see,
 That this star was not a celestial object,
 Rather,
 It was man-made,
 Lights on a frame,
 Bearing witness
 high on the ridgeline
 To all the valley below.
 Rounding the curve,
 I began to realize the deeper witness.
 There, at the second Bath exit,

³ With thanks to: Paul S. Berge, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

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Where a bright sign reading "Adult World" usually is the lone enticement to exit for
a romp in sin,
The faithful of the valley had created
on the near, adjacent property
A large, luminary witness to Christ and his coming.
There was life size nativity, angles, wise men, and kings;
There stands a cross and Christmas tree
and written out in lights was a sign that obscured the other,
"Keep Christ in Christmas."
Now, that's a witness!

Though we stand firmly with one foot planted in both
The secular and the sacred world,
All persons of faith are called by God,
To speak out in the tradition of John,
To bear witness
To the fact, that,
Just as Jesus once came as a baby,
We can be certain that Jesus is coming again;
To judge the world
And to save the world;
To bring eternal life to all those who believe in him.
Now that's a reason to rejoice!
Amen.

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