

Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6-8; 19-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Who gets to speak for God? And how do you know? That's a fundamental question for those of us who believe in God. It's a question that the Christian church has had to grapple with from the very beginning. After we Christians decided that it was indeed Jesus who speaks for God, who actually is the very *Word* of God, we then had to decide who speaks for Jesus in the time between his ascension and his coming again. Against the simplistic story that the church was unified from the time of the apostles to the time when Luther started the Reformation and shattered the church into myriad denominations, there is a more honest understanding that there has been dissention in the ranks throughout the entire history of the church, and in a broader sense, throughout all of human existence. In the books of Acts and some of Paul's letters we learn about one of the earliest disputes in the church: whether in order to become a Christian it was necessary first to become Jewish and keep the Jewish ritual laws. Some said yes, and some said no. In the end, the matter was decided in favor of those who said no, with some minor concessions to those who said yes. And how did they decide? They talked it out and came to a consensus. Unfortunately we don't know all the details, only that the final decision "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," as the participants put it.¹ They don't tell us how they knew that it "seemed good to the Holy Spirit."

The Reformation, which we have been commemorating this year, was another case in point. One of the key issues was that of authority: who can claim to speak for God. The official church's answer in Luther's time was, "only those who have been duly authorized by the church," by which they ultimately meant the pope, St. Peter and his presumed successors. The Lutheran answer was, "whoever proclaims the message that Jesus charged the apostles to proclaim, the Good News of God's reconciling love in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Fast forward to the present when we have all sorts of people claiming to speak for God. Islam gives Mohammed the final word and makes Jesus into a prophet. Hinduism allows for many different manifestations and communications of God. In the Christian world, Lutherans and Catholics continue the lines of thought just mentioned, while so-called Evangelical Christians make the Bible the ultimate authority, so long as you read it literally and acknowledge that it is "inerrant." Television evangelists claim direct revelation from God, and tell us just who God intends to punish when hurricanes and other natural disasters ravage population centers. The Alabama judge who narrowly lost the election for the United States senate this past week claims to be on a mission from God. He has repeatedly transgressed the separation of church and state in his official duties, and refuses to concede defeat in this recent election, convinced that God wants him to be a senator. If you are skeptical of most of these various claims to speak for God, as I am, how do you justify that? What are your criteria? How do *you* decide who speaks for God?

John the Baptist faces exactly these kinds of questions in our Gospel reading this morning. "Who are you" and "why are you baptizing?" John is cagey in his answer. He doesn't tell those who come to question him who he is, not at first anyway. Instead he tells them who he isn't. "I am not the Messiah," he says, as if that's what they must have been thinking. "I am not Elijah either, or the prophet", by which he means the prophet like Moses that Moses promised. This doesn't satisfy the questioners, though – and understandably so. And so finally John gives an answer. "I am the voice ... crying out in the wilderness," preparing the way of the Lord.

¹ Acts 15:28

But we have privileged information. John the Evangelist tells us more than John the Baptist tells his interrogators. He tells us that John has been *sent by God* and he sets this information alongside information about those who come to question Jesus. In contrast to John, they are sent not by God but they are sent *from Jerusalem by* the Pharisees. John is the one who is truly on a mission from God, and they are on a mission from the powers that be, the religious authorities whose job it is to be the intermediaries between God and God's people. The implications is clear. If they were actually doing what they were supposed to be doing, then John the Baptist would not need to baptize and prepare the way of the Lord. John's very presence in the wilderness is a tacit but emphatic criticism of the religious establishment in Jerusalem that serves the status quo and colludes with the ruling powers. We will find out later in John's Gospel just how deep that collusion goes, and just how opposed to God its mission is.

John also tells us that John the Baptist has come to testify to the light, and we know from earlier in this first chapter that the light he is talking about is the *life* that is in Jesus Christ, the Word of God who became flesh. (We'll hear that text on Christmas Eve.) This sets up a contrast that continues throughout the Gospel between light and darkness, life and death. John the Baptist, then, is an agent of light and life while the Pharisees and the other religious leaders are agents of the darkness and of death.

Still, the question for us remains. We trust that John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and prepared his way. We believe Jesus speaks for God, and in fact *is* God. But how do we know who speaks for God today? I think there is a clue for us in John's quoting of Isaiah, who also looked forward to a new day of faithfulness to God and justice for God's people – and not only God's chosen people, but all the people of the earth, whom God all along had also planned to bless through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Those who speak for God are those who are sent “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives... [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” It just so happens that these are the very words that Jesus used in the Gospel according to Luke as he began his public ministry. The focus of those who speak for God is not on themselves, and it is not on defending the interests of their own religious group. Those who speak for God do not spend their time and effort complaining about how badly they are treated by the rest of society and they do not pander to the fears of the stranger and the alien. On the contrary, those who speak for God criticize those in power who exploit and oppress others. They call for repentance and a change of ways wherever sin and self-interest rule. Those who speak for God speak of welcoming strangers and refugees. And ultimately, those who speak for God speak of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, who alone is able to turn our hearts away from self-centeredness and self-destruction to compassion for others, joy in God's presence, and hope in God's future.

Our task throughout the remainder of this shortest of Advent seasons, and also through the remainder of our lives, is be like John, bearing witness with our lives to the light in the darkness of our world, to be a voice in the wilderness speaking out against injustice and on behalf of the oppressed and vulnerable, and pointing to Christ as the source of forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal for a weary and broken world. May we trust confidently in the promise that God is speaking to us and through us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we rejoice continually in God's faithfulness to us through Jesus the Word made flesh. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.