

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our daughter Marian, whom most of you know, sent us a picture yesterday morning of a beautiful sunset from her little village in the north of England. It was just before 10 in the morning, which meant it was just before 4 in the afternoon over there, and this sunset was a shot she had just taken. Of course, she's another 14 degrees of latitude north of us here, and the further you go north in the winter, the earlier the sun sets and the later it rises. I was reminded of our time in St. Petersburg, which is 20 degrees north of us here, when at this time of year Helen would walk the kids to school in the dark in the morning and back home in the dark in the afternoon. Now that got balanced out every June with the famous "white nights," when it never goes completely dark at night. But at this time of year, that was always a distant and somewhat unimaginable dream.

It is exactly this phenomenon of the waning light that got the church thinking about Jesus' coming into the world as the light of the world at precisely this time of year. And so John the Baptist's testimony about the light coming into the world seems especially well timed today, doesn't it, as we head toward the longest night of the year on Thursday. The theme of our readings this morning, especially the first and Gospel readings, is the promise of God making a new beginning. The light and darkness imagery is figurative here, but our literal experience of darkness helps to emphasize the point. Our first reading is addressed to the people of Jerusalem as they are returning from 40 years of exile in Babylon to their city in ruins. You can imagine the mixed feelings. I'm sure they were glad to be freed from their captivity, but at the same time, their home had been utterly destroyed. A new thing is coming, promises Isaiah. The city will be rebuilt. Repairs will be made where they can, and new buildings will rise up from the ground like plants in a garden. And that promised was largely fulfilled. The city was rebuilt. Even a new temple was erected, although it was not quite as big or as impressive as the first temple built by Solomon. But Israel was never again, until modern times, an independent country with its own sovereignty.

Fast forward five hundred years and John the Baptizer is baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming the coming of the Lord. He has somehow gotten crowds of people coming out to him, and that has attracted the attention of the religious leaders. (That's what the word "Jews" means here, which can be confusing because everybody in this story is Jewish. That's maybe an Adult Sunday School topic. We'll talk later.) The point is that this is big symbolic stuff that John is doing, this baptizing, something a prophet would do as a sign that God's promised Messiah was finally going to show up. But it's also rocking the boat. This guy is filling people with hope that maybe Israel could come back, be a great nation again. And *that*, as we learn later in the Gospel, would be a problem for the Romans, who were currently ruling this land. So John the Baptist has to be checked out and maybe shut down.

What happens in this story, and what happens throughout the Gospel of John, hinges on authority. Who is in charge? Who gets to speak for God? Who is to be believed? And the key to that in this Gospel is the word "sent." Notice how John the Evangelist sets this up for us. In the first verse of our reading he tells us, "There was a man *sent* from God whose name was John." Then in verse 15, only three verses later in our reading, we learn that those who come to question John were *sent* by the religious leaders, and this is repeated in the next paragraph. Must be important. John was sent by God, the inquisitors are sent by people, the Pharisees.

"Who do you think you are?" they ask. Notice now the first thing he says in response: "I am not the Messiah." – in case that's what you were thinking. "Okay, who then? Elijah, the prophet who did not die but who was taken up into heaven, and who we are waiting to come back? Or are

you the prophet like Moses that Moses promised the people God would one day send? None of these, he responds. Note John's humility. He knows who he is and who he isn't. He is not the star of this show. This is not about him at all. He is merely the voice in the wilderness, sent to make the Word of God known, the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was God. That's how this whole chapter starts, I'm sure you remember. It will be our final word next Sunday in our Christmas Eve service. That sounds like a big deal, and of course it is. But John wants to emphasize again that this is *not* about him. He is nobody, unworthy to serve even in the lowest task imaginable. He is just making the connections, reconnecting the people to God like the electrical workers who come out to fix fallen power lines after a storm. Once the connection is made, John will soon step aside and let God's power do what it does.

Connecting is my task too. How does all of this connect to us in the third week of Advent, two thousand years in the future? I want to remind you now of one of my rules when reading the Bible. "If you read a story about the Pharisees and you do not see yourselves in the Pharisees, you might be missing the point of the story." The Pharisees are nervous about John's message and his baptizing. They are skeptical. John's boat-rocking is threatening the fragile status quo in a dangerous world. Doesn't that feel familiar? Here we are in the church, getting ready to celebrate Christmas, the coming of God into the world for us and for our salvation, coming to reclaim the world, to put it back on track, to secure the bright future that God intended for us from the beginning of the world. But is that really what we are thinking about in these last days of preparation? Does that match our real expectations? Is it God's bright future we are focused on? Or is it more our private concerns, our family celebrations? Is the best that we can imagine in this season that all of the presents will get bought, all of the meal preparations made, all of cleaning and decorating done, that there will be no fights, no disappointments, that our Christmas Eve service will be festive and enjoyable, like a favorite side dish to the main course, the main action that is happening elsewhere? And aren't our expectations like those of the Pharisees who sent the inquisitors and the best that they could hope for was a return of the good old days of Moses and Elijah?

The message of John the Baptist, like the message of the church in a skeptical, disillusioned age, is that God has something better in store for us than even our perfect, idyllic versions of our holiday festivities make room for. Who do *we* think *we* are as the church? Are we the must-have, essential add-on to any proper celebration of the Christmas season, an accessory to a good and well-lived life? Or is this church thing something more than that? Are we rather meant to be the heralds of a God who is already in our midst, the word made flesh and dwelling among us, with us now in word and sacrament, drawing us to a better version of life than we can even imagine?

It's a rhetorical question. Remember what I said earlier about being sent and who sends you? John ends his Gospel with Jesus after his resurrection, appearing to the disciples and breathing on them the Holy Spirit. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Each of us in Holy Baptism has received that commission and that gift of the Spirit. Who do we think we are? We are not the Messiah. We are not agents of bringing back the good old days. We are not sent to establish a Christian theocracy and impose God's will on the world. We are voices in the wilderness, announcing from the depths of darkness the unlikely promise of God's bright future, a future that comes by the way of a cross, through suffering and death, but by God's deep love for the world and deep commitment to finally and forever conquer the powers of sin, death, and evil. And then we step aside and let God's power do what it does. May we cling to that promise and trust in that power in these darkest of days, and continue to speak these words of hope in the wilderness of this age. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, the light of the world. Amen.