



Advent III: B, 2008
John 1:6-8, 19-28
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Loving God, your messengers, the Prophets, have witnessed to the joy of salvation throughout the ages. Let us hear your voice through the prophetic Word we hear, ponder it deep within our hearts and bear your Word into our world. +Amen.

Many years ago when I was studying for my first master's at the University of Minnesota, I found myself in the Opera Studio program of the University. More often than not, my principle role was to join my voice to the many other voices in the opera chorus. Oh, I had a few glimmers of light as to what might have been as a soloist, but really, I was just in the opera chorus most of the time. Similar to the *Corps de Ballet* of the "Nutcracker" or "Swan Lake," an opera chorus' role more or less adds to the story but isn't the real story.

Oftentimes, the chorus, as in *La Boheme* or *Tosca*, is the voice of the people, the crowd, the commentators, or background noise that prepares the audience for the far more important and significant solo voices to come. Sometimes after great choral moments when those solo voices arrive, voices such as Renee Flemming or Placido Domingo, the opera theaters of the world experience a brief hush, almost a gasp, and suddenly the long anticipated moment has arrived. The moment when the long expected one enters the stage is sheer magic and worth the often exorbitant price of admission.

Even the members of the chorus experience that magic. The conductor experiences that magic. The child, who perhaps was taken to the opera for the first time, experiences that magic. The theater, itself, experiences a magic that anticipates the great, skilled, passionate voice that will tell the story to all those gathered to listen in awe and wonder.

Today, we find ourselves in the Third Sunday of Advent, that particular Sunday that takes its name from the first word of our reading from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, "Rejoice" from the Latin, "Gaudete." On this Gaudete Sunday, we light the third candle in our Advent wreath, a candle that is rose or pink in color. In some churches, the priest wears rose vestments as the Christian Tradition celebrates the midpoint of Advent and a shift in Advent theology. We draw closer to Christmas, Christ's first coming into the world, and we look beyond it with awe and anticipation toward his second coming at the end of time.

John the Baptist was a herald of Christ and his ministry in the world. His voice is like that of a thousand choruses on the great stage of life, a voice that cried in the wilderness, a voice that witnessed to what had somehow been revealed to him somewhere at some moment in time. His voice recalled the voice of the Prophet Isaiah, "Make straight the way of the Lord." His voice echoed the chorus of history that longed and yearned for the One to come, the One who would "proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners," comfort for "all those who mourn."

John bore witness to Christ. In that witness, we learn more about who John was *not*, than we learn who John was. He was not the light; Jesus was the light. John was not Elijah. He was not the last word in prophets. He was not worthy to untie the sandals of the One to come. He was not the one who would baptize with anything more than water; Jesus would baptize with water and the Holy Spirit. John seems to have spent a good bit of his time distinguishing himself from the far more important solo voice that was to come. For all its significance in the Gospels, John's voice prepared the way for the greatest voice of them all, the Voice of God, spoken in and through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Scripture scholars tell us that John was a great preacher. He not only baptized in the Jordan, a ritual baptism of purity, but he was said to have had many followers who believed *he* was the Messiah. Long after his death and even that of Jesus, there were communities of faith for whom John was more important than Jesus. Several of those communities apparently had never even heard of Jesus; that's how powerful John's voice had been. But, John stepped aside; his hero was yet to come.

John pointed his finger toward Jesus, the One whom he believed to be the Christ, the Messiah, the One who would free us from sin, free us from the darkness that often surrounds us, free us from the disappointments of life and lead us to a life where there will be no more darkness, no sorrow, no disappointments, only joy. Then, we will truly be as Isaiah so beautifully put it, "Oaks of Righteousness," the "planting of the Lord." (Isaiah 61:3)

We have come to the midpoint of our Advent journey. The Church has asked us to look deep within our hearts to search for how we might be better people, better heralds of the Gospel. When we look carefully at the readings we have heard over these past weeks and our magnificent Anglican Collects, we see that we are challenged to "cast away the works of darkness" and put on the "armor of light." But how do we do that? How do we put aside those things in our lives that really are aspects of darkness and not of light, that are aspects of selfishness and not of generosity, that are aspects of doubt and not of belief?

We are here today because we want desperately to be better people, to live lives more in keeping with who God calls us to be, to live lives in response to God's call to discipleship, to consistently live lives that we get glimpses of from time to time but that we can't seem to hold on to for whatever reason. For me, I long to be a person, who can regularly experience deep down in my heart, who I believe I am called to be as a child of God. But, my own humanity too often gets in the way. My own pride, my own wants and expectations, too often prevent me from stepping aside so that God can shine through me in ways that I can only imagine or dream.

And you, can you step aside? Can you put aside those things in your life that prevent you from being all God calls you to be, a herald of Christ, a bearer of peace, a messenger through whom God's actions can transform a family, communities, nations and those many places in our world ravaged by poverty, wars, or environmental crises?

Imagine or dream that your life can be truly like that of a child of God. Yes, I said "*child* of God," because during these last weeks of Advent and Christmas to come, we are like children who dream of something new, something that can enable us to experience a hush, a gasp, a magical moment in time. Each of us can be like a child again, innocent and without those things that can prevent us from experiencing the awesome magic of God in Christ, God dwelling in us, transforming us, so that we can transform others and make a difference in our world.

Advent gives us that time, a time of waiting, a time of expectation, a time of anticipation, a time of hope. Next week, the final Sunday of Advent, we'll hear another voice, the voice of the Angel Gabriel, a voice, not crying in the wilderness, but a voice that heralds, "Emmanuel, God with us."

As we prepare once again in awe and wonder for 'God with us' in Christ, let us "Rejoice Always." "Again, I say, rejoice." And, let us "pray without ceasing," giving thanks for 'God with us,' asking God to help us "make straight the way" of Christ in *our* hearts and *for* our world. Amen!