



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Longing for Light...We Point to Jesus
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 14, 2008
Third Sunday in Advent (Year B)
John 1:6-8; 19-28

Let me begin by saying here how thankful our family has been for your kindness and prayers as we have welcomed Aaron into our family. He will be one month old tomorrow and is doing absolutely great.

Two things immediately came to my mind when we learned that we were to have a boy. First, I remembered what Bill Blose used to tell me when we talked about the joy of having daughters. As many of you know, Bill had seven daughters, and he always said, “If God had ever thought another man was needed around the house, he would have sent one.” It’s funny how that came back to my mind when I learned a boy was on the way.

The second thing that came to mind was that the due date was perfect timing for this year’s children’s Christmas Pageant. And so at a staff meeting, I offered (without running it by Alayne, mind you) that Aaron could play the role of baby Jesus in this year’s play. And so I went home and every night I would go over his part with him while he enjoyed life in the womb.

But, as some of you may know, we had trouble securing a time for the pageant, and at one point, we weren’t going to have one at all. And so, I went home and broke the news to Aaron. He wasn’t going to get to be Jesus after all. But then, we did decide on a time and I indicated that Aaron could probably be talked into signing on for the role of Jesus again, which caused our Pittsburgh Steelers-loving member of the staff to quip, “I can just hear his first words out of the womb: ‘Am I Jesus or not?’”

In a strange way, that’s not unlike what the priests and Levites were wondering about John the Baptist. Not “are you Jesus or not,” but rather, “are you the Messiah or not?”

What images come to your mind when I say the name *John the Baptist*? Many of us, I would guess, think of his wild wardrobe—a coat of camels’ hair and a leather belt around his waist. Others of us would remember his strange diet—a diet consisting of locusts and wild honey. Still others of us would hear again his familiar sermon: “Repent, you brood of vipers, or you will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Mention John the Baptist, and most of us will get a picture of a wild-eyed, fashion-challenged, locust-eating preacher with a one word sermon: Repent.

But, if you were to mention John the Baptist to the people who first read John’s gospel, they might have had a different thought. Many of them, you see, thought that John the Baptist was the messiah, the light sent from God. Whenever he preached and baptized in the wilderness, people came from all over the place to hear him. He had a great following and a large number of disciples and the religious leaders were beginning to wonder: Who is this guy? So they sent the scribes and the priests out to the wilderness to ask the Baptizer a simple question: Who are you?

Only it's not a simple question at all. It is a question which cuts to the heart of John's ministry. How he answers will determine the shape of his work and the nature of his ministry.

The gospel writer John knew that. That's why he went to great pains at the beginning of his gospel to tell us exactly who John is: "There was a man sent from God. He came as a witness to the light. He himself was not the light. He came to testify to the light." The Gospel of John makes one thing clear: John the Baptist is not the light.

But the gospel writer's knowing it and our knowing it doesn't mean that John the Baptist knows it. Or, if he knows it, it doesn't mean that he'll admit it. John's whole ministry hinges on his answer.

Who are you? I have no way of knowing what was in the mind of John the Baptist that day in the wilderness when he heard that question. I know how he ultimately answered: To each of the queries, John answers: "I am not." "I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet." And then he bears witness to the One who was coming after him. But, I wonder. Was there any hesitation on his part at all? In my mind, I picture this scene to be eerily similar to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The temptation is to be something other than you are called to be. John is called to be a witness to the light. But remember, some think he could be the light. And I wonder if John were tempted to let them believe that.

And do you know why I wonder about that? I wonder about it because the church seems to hesitate a bit when asked that question. When the questioners come to us in the church—to us who are not the light but who have been given the same task as John of bearing witness to God's light—we often hesitate before answering, or even worse, we say we're something that we're not.

We in the church are asked the same question John the Baptist was asked every single day. Who are you, Church? The questions might be different, they might come from a different angle, but how we answer determines the shape of all that we do.

In a time when the church is shrinking, I'm afraid we may have fallen to the temptation to answer the questions we get by giving the safe answer, by giving the answer that we think the questioner wants to hear. And the questions keep coming at us.

Will your worship satisfy my desire to be entertained?

Will you provide me the choices I'm used to in a consumer culture?

Will you support my patriotism?

Will you keep my kids out of trouble?

Will you let me by with a half-hearted commitment?

Will you speak against the sins of others but bless my way of life?

The questions could go on forever. And they do. They keep coming at us in the church and they ask us to identify who we are. If we give the answer the questioner seeks, all is well it seems. But what if we don't? What will happen to our ministry? What will happen to us? What will become of the church?

This is precisely the temptation that John the Baptist faced. All he had to do was say yes to any of the questions and his own ministry would have been multiplied a hundred fold. Are you the Messiah? Elijah? The prophet? To say yes to any of those things

would have opened the door to a greater following among the people. But, it would have been the end of John's true identity as a witness to the light.

And the same is true for the church today. We are sent into the world that God loves with the task of pointing to the God we see most clearly in Jesus Christ. We are sent to bear witness to God's love for the world—saint and sinner alike. We are called to proclaim God's welcome, to share the joyous news that God has entered the world in the person of Jesus Christ. That in him, the light has come that no darkness will ever overcome. And all that we do should be done to support that task alone. All that we do should be a way of pointing not to ourselves but to God. And, if we are faithful to that identity, whether or not we are successful by the world's terms won't matter one bit. We will have been who God called us to be, and we will have done what God is calling us to do.

Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, and he did not yield. He remembered that he is the Christ, the light.

John the Baptist was tempted in the wilderness, and he did not yield. He remembered that he is not the light. He is a witness to the light.

The temptation now lures us. The voices call to us, "Who are you, Church?" The way we answer is pivotally important, for it will shape all that we do.

So here's my hope: May the church throughout the world—but especially here at Massanutten—stand firm against the temptation to be all the things that the questioners ask us to be, and remain what God calls us to be: a witness to the light of the world whose birth we will celebrate just a week and a half from now.

In *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner captures the truth of our lives, reminding us that we are always to point not to ourselves, but the true light. Buechner writes, "There is little that we can point to in our lives as deserving anything but God's wrath. Our best moments have been mostly grotesque parodies. Our best loves have been almost always blurred with selfishness and deceit. But there is something to which we can point. Not anything we ever did or were, but something that was done for us by another. Not our own lives, but the life of one who died in our behalf and yet is still alive. This is our only glory and our only hope. And the sound that it makes is the sound of excitement and gladness and laughter that floats through the night air from a great banquet."

All around us, people are longing for the light. And the good news for us who gather on this third Sunday of Advent is that we have been commissioned as witnesses to the light—to Jesus the Christ. In pointing to him, we become most fully who we are.