

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2002

“I Am Not the Messiah.”

John 1: 6-9, 19-28; Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

If today’s reading sounds familiar
it’s because last week’s gospel reading was also about John the Baptist.
At first it seems curious
that the Lectionary would place two parallel readings about John the Baptist
one right after another, two weeks in a row,
one from Mark and one from John.
Why repeat the same story twice?

Well, it is the same story, and it isn’t.
Everybody tells a story with their own twist, and that goes for gospel writers, too:
...the pictures are painted in different shades
...the accents of the conversations fall in different places
...the prophet’s oddity shows up in a different light in John’s gospel than in Mark’s
...and the wonder of the coming Incarnation touches us in yet another unexpected way.

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In the fourth gospel, John is never called “the Baptist”.
Here, he is John the Witness.
And whereas John the Baptist’s main interest is Water,
John the Witness is more concerned with Light.
Which makes him a good person to have around this time of year.

It’s no wonder we like to plug in so many strings of lights in December.
Not only are they beautiful to look at,
but they chase away the darkness as we approach December 21 (next Saturday)
the shortest day and longest night of the year.
Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor imagines seeing John the Witness
striding back and forth beneath our lights –
“the streetlights hung with candy canes, reindeer, six-pointed stars.
You can hear <John> testifying
that *the true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world.*”

I remember driving down a busy boulevard in Atlanta in January a few years ago.
Actually, I was riding, while a friend was driving
so I could do a lot of looking out the window.
Neon lights lined the streets, beckoning me into stores and banks and restaurants.
Headlights of cars streamed toward me from the opposite direction.

Streetlights illumined the asphalt and steel.
Traffic lights flashed red, yellow, and green, monitoring our every movement.

Then we passed a section of street that was noticeably darker
 like a black hole in the lightscape.
It was an old, gothic-style church.
As we passed,
 I could barely see the outline of a round, stained-glass window high overhead.
 I imagined how radiant it must be from the inside
 on a bright Sunday morning.
 But now all was dark around this house of worship.
 No flashing neon drawing my attention. No signs shouting at my soul.
Whatever light I might see emanating from this dark sanctuary,
 I would have to enter, and linger inside, and wait for the sun to come up.
The memory of that church comes back to me today
 in the gospel's description of John the Witness:
 *"He himself was not the light..... but he came to testify to the light.
 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."*

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I think those of us who are drawn into houses of worship
 come because we want light in our lives.
I suspect, though,
 that the light we receive is often different than the light we thought we needed.
We come wanting a light we can hold onto.
 Perhaps a flashlight we can shine on the road we're travelling,
 or point ahead of us to see what's coming that might get in our way.
We come in search of light for the journey, but we want a light with a handle
 and, preferably, an on/off switch, so we can use it just when we need it.

We want to understand God, which is not an altogether bad desire.
 But so often in our attempts to understand,
 we fail to see that we cannot contain God in our minds.
 We cannot hold in our hands the true light which enlightens everyone.
We want to wrap God in a package, with a pretty Christmas bow tied up at the top,
 but we find that our boxes are inadequate
 because God always escapes the flimsy wrappings of our explanations.

Sometimes we resemble the priests and Levites from Jerusalem.
The religious interrogators
 who come shining their searchlights in John's face, looking for answers.
They are trying desperately to pin John down. To find out just who he thinks he is.
 But John doesn't want to talk about himself:
 Who are you?, they ask.

*I am not the Messiah, he says.
(An interesting answer since that is not what they asked him.)
What then? Are you Elijah?
I am not.
Are you the prophet?
No.
Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us.
What do you say about yourself?*

I am the voice, says John...finally. Which isn't much help.

A voice is difficult to control.

You can't really see a voice,
which is perhaps the very point John is trying to make.

If his interrogators want to find the Messiah, if they want to see God,
they are looking in the wrong place.

John is only *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.*

He is the Witness, the one who points to the light.

But the identity of the voice is not the important thing,
rather the One whom the voice proclaims is the proper center of attention.

The problem is that these diligent, religious people
are having trouble opening themselves to the mystery of a God beyond their grasp.
They have spent so much of their lives trying to measure up,
and sizing up their own righteousness,
and finding comfort in their own excellence,
and feeling good about themselves because of what they have done
(or have not done)
in comparison with other lesser folks.

They have buried themselves under such a pile of religious and emotional clutter
that they cannot see beyond the mess
to catch a glimpse of the light that is big enough and brilliant enough
to enlighten everyone
even the unworthy ones,
the sinful and broken ones,
and the crazy ones, like John.

John knows they cannot see the light,
or they wouldn't be trying so hard to make their own light.
But still he testifies to the light, because that is what a witness does.

*“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.”

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The prophet Isaiah also testified to the Messiah who could not yet be seen.
He spoke of one who would bring salvation,
 and cause righteousness and praise to spring up.
One who would appear in the world as a tiny shoot emerges from the ground.
 A shoot that once lay hidden from view, down in the dirt as a little seed.

Knowing the Messiah means knowing what to look for.
 It means knowing what the signs of promise are.
 Isaiah is clear about what the signs of promise are.
They have nothing to do with the kind of religion that tries to manipulate God
 for our own benefit.
They are not about having the right doctrinal formula,
or about praying just the right words in order to secure our ticket into heaven.
The signs of promise, the signs of the Messiah's coming,
 are not about what we can do for ourselves.

We only begin to know the Messiah
 when we see that he brings something that we can't bring, because we don't have.
He *brings good news to the poor, binds up the brokenhearted,*
 proclaims liberty to the captive, release to the prisoner.

The poor, and brokenhearted, and captive, and imprisoned
 are people who are utterly at a loss in their lives for what to do.
They are people who have no illusions of self-sufficiency or self-righteousness.
They are the underdogs. The weaklings. The bums.
 The drunks. The losers. The broken down and sinful.
They are the ones who are likely to be hanging around a guy like
 John the Witness,
 out in the wilderness, hoping for a break,
 hoping for something totally new to happen to them,
 something beyond their deserving,
 something that will help them start their life all over again.

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If John the Witness is any indication,
 then knowing the Messiah begins with being able to say "I am not the Messiah".
Knowing that we are not the source of our own salvation
 is the first ray of light to break over the horizon.

Knowing that "I am not the Messiah" means knowing
 that true joy does not depend on what I can accomplish,
 or what I can earn,
 but on what God is willing to accomplish for me despite my poverty.

Knowing that "I am not the Messiah" means knowing that

my righteousness and reputation
is never enough to make me acceptable to God,
or to the world...or even to myself.
Our religiosity is not the proper focus of our faith,
but there is One whose righteousness and reputation is enough for us,
and enough for everyone.

Knowing that "I am not the Messiah" means knowing that
my hope doesn't rest in my own power to control my life,
or to secure my future, or the future of my children,
but that my hope rests on the One who gave up all security for my sake.

When I see that I am not the Messiah,
the false lights of pride and reputation and self-righteousness
are suddenly unplugged,
and I can begin to see the glow of the true light
which shines in the darkness.

We can put down our flashlights and stop shining them in the faces of others
to criticize and to blame
And instead be thankful that the true light shines for us all.

And that true light draws us closer,
until we join in the awestruck silence of the others who have come to see the light....

We are not an impressive looking bunch.
We look a little disheveled, like in those Christmas morning pictures
when you've just crawled out of bed after a long sleep.
But that doesn't matter, because we're not looking at ourselves.
We are adoring the majesty of a little child who has just come into the world.
And as we fall on our knees to worship him, we can hear the words of Zechariah,
the father of John the Witness, who said

*"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Amen.

~ Rev. Michael J. Hoyt