

Advent 3B - Gaudete Sunday - Joy - John 1.6-8, 19-28

Before we get to John, I just wanted to mention that for our Lutheran brothers and sisters, especially those with Scandinavian heritage, today is a very important day in the season of Advent. December 13th is St. Lucy's Day. She was a young woman who lived in the late third century and early 4th century. She was a devout Christian who was martyred for the faith in 304 C.E. at the age of 21. I discovered a common story told of her that she would secretly bring food to the persecuted Christians in Rome, who lived in hiding in the catacombs under the city. She would wear candles on her head; so, she had both her hands free to carry things. Lucy or Lucia means 'light' in Italian so her name very much suited her and aptly described the assistance she gave to her fellow Christians who were oppressed and persecuted for believing that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. She offered some lightness to the darkness they hid in when she brought them sustenance and she literally wore light. She must have been quite a sight with a crown full of candles lighting her way. Her appearance must have seemed other-worldly and gave her fellow Christians some hope and joy when she approached them.

In the early 1700's Scandinavians began to celebrate her feast day. Perhaps living in a country in the far north in the winter when days are much shorter than ours, the people of Norway, Sweden and Denmark were happy to celebrate a saint

associated with light to brighten those dark winter days in December. Today when celebrating this feast day of a saint in light, a young girl is selected to be Lucy. She wears a white robe and a wreath of candles on her head. Other girls who accompany her also wear white robes and hold candles in their hands and the boys dress as star boys, stars being another symbol of light in the celestial darkness. This festival is celebrated across Scandinavia as well as Finland and some other countries. It's a celebration of light coming into the world during a dark time. Songs are sung and special treats are consumed as part of the St. Lucy celebrations.

Today is the Sunday of Joy, Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete means 'rejoice' in latin. It's a time when we feel closer to the season of Joy that is Christmas when we welcome the light of Christ coming into the world with the Birth of Jesus. Our Advent wreaths shed more light to remind us of the importance of light in our dark world. As Lucy gave hope to her fellow Christians by bringing light to their dark world, we hear about John who first testified to the light coming into the world.

When we hear the words 'testifying' or 'testimony' we think of a trial and witnesses being questioned under oath. This is not far off from what is happening to John in this gospel passage. Here he is more 'John the Witness' than 'John the Baptist'. John is being questioned by the priests and Levites from Jerusalem. The Pharisees have sent them. They've come to John in Bethany to find out who exactly he is and what he is doing out there in the wilderness. They know people

are going out there to see him and being baptized and they want answers. We don't know if they swore him in, but from what we know about John we know they are going to hear the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

However, John is very careful in his answers during this testimony. It's as if a lawyer told him beforehand to just answer the questions simply without offering anymore information than necessary. First they start by trying to establish who John is. The transcript goes like this:

Q: Who are you? R: I am not the Messiah.

Q: Are you Elijah? R: I am not.

Q: Are you the prophet? R: No.

So far, he tells them who he isn't. He doesn't say who he is. He doesn't take credit for being someone he isn't. They lose a little patience with John. They need answers. They have people to report back to in Jerusalem. Next question.

Q: Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

R: I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. 'Make straight the way of the Lord.' As the prophet Isaiah said.

With this answer, John establishes that he is very familiar with the prophetic scriptures. As we know, he is descended from a long line of priests. He was raised in a temple and would have grown up hearing the word of God from the scrolls of

the prophets. He knows his stuff. He also tells his questioners that he is ‘the voice in the wilderness’, a prophecy from Isaiah. John is aware of the promises of Messiah. These details would have got their attention. John is saying his work and presence is the fulfillment of prophecy. His testimony is important. He also tells them that the light he is testifying to is among them. Messiah is close. Messiah will soon be here and he’ll be much greater than John. The Pharisees have been put on notice. The long ago prophecies of Isaiah are about to be fulfilled in the persons of John and Jesus. The light is coming and John is pointing toward it. His work is to point towards the light and not be the light. His role is to make the path straight; so, people can see directly to Jesus. John will not get in the way of what Jesus has been sent to be and do. That’s not part of his ministry and work.

We know what the Pharisees did with that information. They held it. They kept it filed away to use against Jesus and undermine His authority and purpose. They did not accept who Jesus was. They would not believe Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. They didn’t believe John. Perhaps this taking of John’s testimony was the start of their information gathering for Jesus’ trial several years later. The beginning of their commitment to extinguish the light.

What do we do with this information about Jesus that John shares with us? What do we do about this light coming into the world? How do we prepare ourselves to receive it and incorporate it into our hearts, souls and bodies? We

strive to let that light shine out of us in service to others. We use that light to draw attention to injustices and inequities in our society that keep people poor and hungry. We use the light to inspire us to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. We use the light to inspire hope in our hearts...to motivate us to work for peace...to give us the capacity to rejoice...to strengthen us to share our story of faith with the people around us and invite them to believe in Jesus and His message of love and forgiveness.

In this time of pandemic we use that light to encourage those who have worked so hard for us and risked their own health as essential workers and especially for frontline healthcare workers who have witnessed the devastation of Covid-19. We use the light to reach out to people we know who live alone and are particularly isolated by the restrictions we are asked to follow to ensure each others safety. We use the light to support each other through this unprecedented moment in history we live in. We use the light to diminish the darkness of fear and anxiety. We use the light to destroy the darkness just as St. Lucy used it to find her Christian brothers and sisters who were in hiding in the catacombs and gave them hope and encouragement. We use the light as John pointed to it in order to give us hope that Messiah came just as God promised us.

As Isaiah said so many years before, 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who walked in deep darkness on them light has

shined.’ John tells us that Jesus is that true light, which enlightens everyone, and that light has come and is coming into the world. And we no longer have to be in the darkness for nothing can extinguish the light of Christ. Now, it’s part of our work to keep pointing to that light. Amen.

Preached on Sunday 13 December, Advent 3B at Grace Church, Milton

by The Rev. Karine Snowdon.