

Advent 3

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The Rev. Canon David W. Lovelace

Who was this strange man named John out in the desert dressed in preposterous clothing and calling people to repentance? Was John the one predicted by Israel's prophets? Jewish hopes and expectations were a mishmash of ideals based on the words spoken by prophets, based on tradition and pious imagination. Some believed the Messiah would appear unexpectedly without a forerunner or any warning. Others believed that Elijah would return as a harbinger of the final days in which the Messiah would appear. The Messiah would usher in a time when all of creation would be judged and brought into the harmony God intended in the creation. Still others believed a prophet would be in their midst to reveal the gradual evolution of God's of cosmic tidings.

One thing people knew for sure, John was preaching and baptizing in a way that grabbed the attention of those who went out to hear him. Jewish authorities and religious leaders were curious about John. Who was he and by what authority did he preach? They sent some religious leaders from Jerusalem to inquire of John. "Who are you?"

It is interesting to me that John never says who he is rather he tells them who he is not. He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah and he is not a prophet like Moses.

So they press John to say something about himself. "What do you say about yourself?" John answers with words from the prophet Isaiah, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord." In short John did not claim to be someone he was not. He refused to fit into any of the convenient traditional categories that the Jewish leaders tried to apply to him.

The lure of tradition this time of the year is irresistible. It seems to overwhelm reasonable thinking. There are folks in the parish office who absolutely do not like snow. Yet, they talk about how wonderful it is to have a white Christmas. People who do not darken the doors a church building all year long find themselves drawn to Christmas services. Those who hold tight to their financial resources find themselves being generous as they

respond to Christmas appeals. Tradition has an enormous power over us this time of the year.

I admit I love the Christmas traditions. The Advent wreaths, Christmas pageants, cards, decorated trees, and family rituals. I have no plans to resist these traditions and I am not suggesting you do either.

But I do want to raise a point that I believe this story about John brings to our attention. Tradition is a good thing, a piece of the truth but not the whole truth. Tradition is not the whole story of how God is working among us. Tradition cannot begin to express all that is really going on when we recall the Christmas story and the promise the Christ will come again.

Tradition has a way of wrapping things up in neat little packages. It has a way of taking a piece of the truth and isolating it. Tradition said that John was either the Messiah or Elijah. If John was neither the Messiah nor Elijah why was he preaching and baptizing? John said to the religious leaders, God is doing something way beyond the bounds of tradition. There is one coming after me who will bring a new day that will destroy your traditional concepts.

The Rev'd. Dr. Francis Wade wrote, "Tradition is to truth as a bottle of water is to a great river. The water came from the river. It is part of the river. But the real river is, in fact miles of life tumbling across the land."

The traditions that you and I enjoy so much about Christmas are just tiny pieces of what God is doing in the birth and life of Jesus. We want God to fit into our honored traditions but that is like trying to catch God in a bottle. It just cannot be done.

John denied that he was anyone special. He was but the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the way of the Lord. John was called by God to build the highway.

John was preparing a road for God to come to people where they live. He came to open their hearts, level their pride, and fill their emptiness with promises of one greater than he. Far more John was willing to admit, he was but the instrument, he was but the herald of good news.

The Gospel writer John recognized that John, the first witness to Jesus, arrived on the scene before Jesus. John did not arrive to get everything decorated and

ready for Christmas but to "bear witness to the light." John came to assure people that the darkest forces of the world are not as powerful as they might seem. He came to alert people to the fact that the Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth. John was not the Light but came to bear witness to the Light.

Perhaps the greatest composer of church music is Johann Sebastian Bach. At the end of each piece that he composed Bach wrote these words, "To God alone the glory." Bach was not denying his musical gift. He was acknowledging that in fact his talent was a gift from God. He was privileged to share that God given gift.

We live in a culture where pointing to one's abilities and accomplishments is considered essential. When you or I go for a job interview what we are able to say about ourselves on a resume and in the interview will attain the position we seek. As Christians we identify ourselves as "anointed" in baptism. We are in Christ and Christ lives in us. We are God's agents, God's hands in this world. We are the ones called to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and set the prisoners free. In no small way we have identified a Messianic calling for ourselves.

John makes the opposite point. He speaks the truth about all of us when he said, "I am not the Messiah. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." John's entire ministry was to point away from himself to Jesus. We do well to remember our calling is to do the same.

We are not any one of us the Messiah, that position has already been filled. We are called to bear witness to the Light. The best lamp is not one that calls attention to its own loveliness rather it is the lamp that we can see by.

Like our predecessors we have come to a time of the year when wonderfully crafted traditions fill our lives. I have no misgivings about these traditions and the goodness they elicit from each of us. We do need to hold in mind the truth that our traditions are reminders of God among us and working through us. Our traditions are as bottled water to a great river.

May the bottled water of our traditions draw us closer to God and open our eyes to see the mighty river of God's Spirit that continues to move among us filling our lives with light. May we become more like John, heralds of good tidings, as we bear witness to the Light that gives meaning and hope to our lives.

