

## Advent III December 14, 2008

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

Last week we heard John the Baptist’s demand for repentance, today we get the other side of his ministry. This is John’s call to bear witness to Jesus. That’s what those words in the Gospel we just heard are about. John was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. My favorite image of what those words mean comes by way of a 16th Century German artist named Mathias Grunewald. In 1516, as part of a much larger work, he painted the picture that’s in the bulletin. Take a look at it. Among a lot of other things, it’s a painting of John the Baptist. It’s a theological, not an historical picture; that is, it talks about who John is, it doesn’t attempt to reproduce an event in his life.

Did you find John? That’s him on the right, pointing an oversized index finger at the crucified Jesus. (Remember, this isn’t historical; John died before the crucifixion—but that’s not important here.) It’s very easy not to notice John—even though he’s right there. The stance of his body, the direction he’s looking, and what he’s doing, all move your attention right past him, and on to the cross. Most eyes slide right over John and settle on Jesus. Even when you try to look at John, everything about him pushes your attention away from him, and back to the Lord. That’s a wonderful statement about John—and one that makes him a wonderful model for all of us—especially during Advent.

John the Baptist is the one who recognizes the presence of God—and then, by everything he does, he moves the focus away from himself, and to Christ. Imagine that. Let the picture soak in.

What would it look like to do what John is doing—to recognize God, and to live and act in such a way that the eyes of others slide right over us and rest on what we have seen? It's a very powerful image. (That's all with the picture for now.)

And Advent is about this, it's about discovering, and recognizing, the presence and power of God; and it's about pointing, and so drawing attention, not to ourselves, but to God.

Advent has this odd character to it—it's about the past, the present and the future, all at the same time—and it's about preparing ourselves to discover the presence of God in all of those. That's one reason we always begin Advent with readings about the future—the second coming, the end of all things, all that stuff; and that's why we continue with such readings throughout the seasons; like today's from Isaiah—readings that promise a new future, a future where God's will is indeed done on earth as it is in heaven; a future that belongs fully to God.

And this is clearly part of our hope, of our faith. We *do* believe that something better is coming. This vision of a future that is unambiguously God's, a vision that can lead us both to constant expectancy and to the conviction that God hasn't yet finished with us or with his creation, such a vision is vital. It can draw us forward in anticipation and it can give purpose, comfort and hope to the present. Advent is full of this, and it is something we can point to in confidence. The future is God's. But that's not all Advent is about—and it's not the hardest part.

Then there is the past. As we get closer to Christmas, Advent moves us from the future to the past, (the Wise Men are getting closer and closer to the manger) and asks us to prepare once more to celebrate an historical event that happened a long time ago.

And it's not all that hard to point to the first Christmas and say, 'God is here; this isn't about me, it's about him'. To be sure, it takes some preparation, and some intention, on our part to make this historical event a present reality. Still, if we pay attention, we can do that; and we in fact do that, year in and year out. The past is fairly easy.

The same sort of thing is generally true of our own lives. Discovering God's hand in our own personal histories is something we can, and need to, do with some frequency and with some care. The EFM practice of spiritual autobiographies reminds us that looking at our own life stories is a powerful way to discover, to point to, and to celebrate the presence and activity of God in our lives. Try it. Spend some time with your own history, with the prayerful intention of discovering the presence of God in the midst of your life. Amazing things can happen; the world can shift a bit, and we can begin to recognize that the past, in small ways as well as large, belongs to God.

The present, of course, is always the hardest—and that's the wonder of John the Baptist. He was able to recognize Jesus in his own present, without halos or glowing in the dark, or miracles, or anything else to guide him but hope and attentiveness. He was able to see in this man Jesus the presence and the love of God, to see him for who is was, and to point to him.

This business of recognizing and pointing to God in *our* present is perhaps the deepest challenge of Advent. In fact, one of the great arts of the Christian life is gradually becoming able to look at our world, and at our lives, with the special perspective and care that come from expecting to find in them the presence and activity of God—expecting to find something we can recognize and point to.

And all the great spiritual teachers tell us that the only way we will see this is if we are looking for it, and expecting to find it.

Sometimes that presence is found, as John shows us in today's picture, in places that are frightening or ugly, like the cross. Sometimes it is found in moments of hope and joy—big moments, for us, big moments even for our world.

But I am convinced that we are most likely to find, and so be able to point to, God's presence in small things, seemingly insignificant things, things easily overlooked—things like friends and neighbors rallying around during a time of need; things like love, or hope, breaking through the struggles that we all face, and watch others face; things like an unexpected gift of insight, or compassion. Life is rich with such instants of the presence of God; instants where we can point and say "I am not the light; but the light is here, look at it."

And the call of John the Baptist to us is that wherever we catch a glimpse of that light—there we are to point, there we are to stand, there we are to act, so the eyes of all who look can slide right past us and rest on that light.

So this morning I offer you a picture—John the Baptist pointing away from himself so others can look past him and see the Lord. Take the picture home and work on it—or create your own image of what it looks like to bear witness to the light of Christ. It's not a bad way to approach the last few days of Advent.

