

December 13, 2020
The Third Sunday in Advent
Year B
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda Warner
Zoom Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Reflected Light

“Then all the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:4-5) From the gospel of Matthew, the third chapter.

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Mark 1:4-5) From the gospel of Mark, the first chapter.

“John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him...” (Luke 3:7a) From the gospel of Luke, the third chapter.

That John the Baptist could really pack a riverbank. The gospels of Matthew and Mark say that **all** the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the people who lived in the region of the Jordan river, in other words, a lot of people, who lived near a water source in a region that was, for the most part, a dry and hilly wilderness, **all** the people were going out to hear John preach and to receive the baptism that he offered.

The gospel of Luke doesn't give us as many details about the origins of the people who were going out to see John by the Jordan river, but still, he describes them as crowds. Crowds going to listen to him preach. Crowds going to be told by him how to change their lives so that their lives would bear fruit.

People were listening to him. Poor people, rich people. Humble people, the big-name people. The gospel of Luke tells us that even tax collectors and soldiers came to be baptized and that even these important, powerful people in the social structure of the world that John lived in asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

They asked **him**, a man who was dressed in a garment made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, a man who ate the food that he could find in nature, which amounted to locusts and wild honey, bugs and the things that bugs produced; important people asked **him** how they should rearrange their lives so that they could bear the fruits of repentance.

Even Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of the Jewish people, came to John to receive his baptism. They knew that in his ministry something important was going on, a revival of sorts, and they did not want to be left behind, left out of the religious fervor that was sweeping their communities, drawing people out to the river, to hear the strange preacher, and to receive his baptism, a baptism that meant that they would change their lives, a baptism that promised them that God was working in their world.

It could have been a heady thing for John. Seeing all of those people come to him. Having all of those people listen to him. Being able to tell important people what to do, how to change their lives. Being able to take

the religious leaders of his day to task, with what appeared in to be impunity in those early days of his ministry.

But John never let it get to him; he never let it go to his head. He resisted that all too human temptation to make his work, to make his ministry about him. He remained on point, he remained on message.

Our gospel reading for today from the gospel of John tells us this about John's frame of mind regarding his own importance. It says, "When the Jew[ish leaders] sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask [John], "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'" (John 1:19-20)

They asked him, "Are you Elijah?"

He answered, "I am not."

They asked him, "Are you the prophet?"

He answered, "No."

Then they asked him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John answered, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:21-23)

Then he told them, what John the Baptist always says, "I baptize with water. 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." (John 1:26-27).

If we were together in one physical place, I would ask you know to raise your hands if you have ever read the Lord of the Rings series or if you have ever seen the Lord of the Rings movie series that came out in the early

2000s. I would ask you that because there's a part of the first book of that series and the first movie of that series, *The Fellowship of the Ring* that reminds me of John the Baptist. Can you imagine what it is?

It's the scene where Frodo looks into the mirror of the elf queen Galadriel and then, horrified by the future he sees reflected there, tries to give Galadriel the one ring, the ring of power, the ring that enslaves and corrupts all who bear it. Frodo believes that the Galadriel's goodness, Galadriel's strength, Galadriel's own power, will be strong enough to conquer the power of the ring. But Galadriel knows better. She sees what the future would be if she were to take the ring.

This is what she says.

"Wise the Lady Galadriel may be," she said, "yet here she has met her match in courtesy...You begin to see with a keen eye. I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp...now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

[Galadriel] lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone...She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the

light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. "I pass the test," she said. "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel." (Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring 11.7, pp.356-57)

Galadriel was tempted by the one ring, the ring of power, the ring that had been crafted to tempt, to sway, to bring people under the control of the evil lord, Sauron. But she resisted the lure of the power, the greatness, the way that she could shape the world to her will. She resisted the temptation, and because of that, remained herself, who she was, who she was meant to be. Not the supreme lady whose glory would subject all people to her will and bring despair, but herself. Her power, her influence would diminish from the world but she would be who and what she was meant to be.

I hear in her words, an echo of John the Baptist's words. He was surrounded by the temptation of power, by the temptation of influence, by the temptation of being revered for who he was, for the authority that he had been given, for his popularity, for his wisdom, for the appearance that he was connected intimately, closely with the greatness and the glory of God.

Galadriel said, in her rejection of the temptation of power "I will diminish and go into the west and remain Galadriel."

John the Baptist said, not in today's gospel reading, but a few chapters later in John's gospel:

You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him,

rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.' (John 3:28-30)

My children reminded me recently that a few years ago, I preached a Reformation sermon, that, by my own admission, Martin Luther would have hated. Well, I preached half a sermon that Martin Luther would have hated. I said so myself about halfway the sermon. The reason he would have hated that sermon to that halfway point was that to that point, the sermon had been about him. Martin Luther never really, at his core, wanted people to talk about him. He wanted people to talk about Jesus, to be fascinated by Jesus, to be overwhelmed, as he had been, by the love that they found in Jesus. After that halfway point, that years ago Reformation sermon became a sermon about Jesus, so hopefully Martin Luther forgave me my earlier excesses in talking about him at all.

Today, I am continuing my trend of preaching sermons that their subjects would not like. I have talked a lot about John the Baptist today, which is something that John the Baptist would have never done.

John the Baptist preached sermons about repentance, about making life changes, about preparing, about getting ready, because the messiah was coming.

People came to listen to him, people came to be baptized by him, but John the Baptist was never consumed by his own ministry, by his own importance. He knew that he was the getting ready prophet, always pointing the way to the one who would come after him.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you find the same message. Even when people wondered whether John might be the messiah, his message was this, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not

worthy and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7-8)

John would not have wanted a sermon to be about him because he knew that even his own ministry was not about him, never about him. It was about getting a community ready for their messiah.

But still, we have something to learn from John the Baptist. In a discussion of John the Baptist with some folks here at Emmanuel, someone came up with a great way of thinking about John the Baptist and his ministry. John the Baptist understood himself to be someone who was not the source of light, but who reflected the light of God. He was like the moon, which has no light of its own, but reflects the light of the sun. John the Baptist, reflected the light of the Son, Jesus.

In today’s gospel reading, which tells us about John the Baptist, from the perspective of John the Evangelist’s gospel, we hear this,

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. (John 1:6-8)

This sermon, which is about John the Baptist, is not really about John the Baptist in the same way that John the Baptist’s ministry was not about himself. It was always about reflecting the light of Christ, of Jesus. In the readings we have explored about John the Baptist, Jesus had not yet begun his public ministry. But John the Baptist knew he was coming. He could still see him, like the sun rising on the horizon. John was the Advent prophet, waiting and hoping and pointing to the rising sun; the rising Son. Before anyone could see him coming, John the Baptist knew, perhaps he could feel

it more than see it at first; God's glory breaking like the dawn across a weary world.

In the writings about John the Baptist that we find in the four gospels, it appears that, unlike Galadriel, John was not even tempted to assume power or greatness for himself. He either never had or gave up any thought of his own glory and instead, did what he knew he was called to do. Point to Jesus and prepare the way. Like Galadriel, though, what he also knew was in order for Jesus' ministry to rise, his moment of fame must pass, he was not the source of the light, his was a reflected glory.

That is what we can learn from John the Baptist. To be ourselves, to use all that we have, every gift we have been given, every lesson we have learned, all the wisdom we have gained, to reflect the light of Christ, who was, ever and always, who John the Baptist's ministry was about. Who truly has been who this sermon is about all along, because one just can't preach about John the Baptist without it being about Jesus. Jesus was the one that John the Baptist pointed to with every fiber of his being, the one who was coming, and the one who we know is here, Emmanuel, God with us, the present and the coming one. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.