

## Who We Are Not

Wayne Waibel – 12/17/2023

This third Sunday of Advent is traditionally recognized as the candle that represents joy. Hope and faith have preceded it, and peace follows next Sunday. I know it appears as though joy is in short supply these days, so I won't elaborate on what constitutes joy in this world – at this time. We all know what it is, and what it is not.

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Likewise, the gospel of John teaches us the significance of what is not through the actions of the Baptizer, who responded to the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem to find out who he was with the far more relevant confession of who he was not.

The only thing John the Baptist confessed to being was a witness. And so began the greatest story ever told. On earth – witnessing is perhaps the highest calling one can fulfill. Our witnessing turns us from our obsessive preoccupation with ourselves.

What John was doing was getting the common folk all riled up in anticipation of the Messiah's coming. His testimony was spreading rapidly, so it didn't take long for his reputation to reach the ears of the Pharisees in Jerusalem. Once they got word of this Baptizer – they immediately dispatched a group of priests to ascertain John's intentions.

As the Roman occupation of the area was well established and the ruling class among the Jews had secured a tenuous peace, their intentions were probably less about seeking identities and more about assessing threat levels. A people filled with the joy of the coming Messiah, were an emboldened people. Emboldened people are very easily turned to rebellion.

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Now that our world is once again held captive by a growing pandemic, social oblivion and a political disconnect – more and more people are falling into the "Woe is me" frame of mind. And when you are mired down with that preoccupation, you are no longer seeking resolution from suffering – you are looking to assign blame. And that, friends – is a most dangerous pursuit.

The minute you begin to embrace anything other than that which is life affirming – you begin the diving spiral toward discontent. And when the tendency toward decency and clarity and wonder and hope and faith and joy is abandoned – we’re done. This is the exact point at which a witness to the Light and the Life of all becomes critical to the fulfillment of that Light.

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Perhaps the most enlightened of all Christian traits is the strength of conviction. Nowhere is this made clearer than in Mary’s Magnificat from Luke, which informs next week’s lectionary.

She speaks of the future, but she does so as though it has already happened. The mother of our Lord is speaking with such conviction that to her – what is to come – in her mind’s eye – has already been.

God’s salvation is meant to transform the world here and now. Our role in our time is, like John’s role in his time, to confess who we are not and proclaim the One to whom we testify.

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And so, we have the future as memory, and with it and John's witness – the birth of a thing called testimony. It resonates in courts of law – certainly. In fact, it can be the dividing line between guilt and innocence. But it is also the vehicle we use to convey our allegiance to - and belief in - the Light which cannot be covered up by darkness.

God is at work in the world – even the broken world we now endure. And we do not have to always look deep for that Light. Quite often it almost blinds us, it is so obvious.

Back in the dark days of COVID, I stepped off an elevator and encountered a small child holding on to his mother's hand. Our eyes met – I smiled, and he smiled back. Since I was wearing a mask, I wondered out loud how he knew I was smiling. His mother responded immediately, "He can see it in your eyes."

And that is what we bring to the table as followers of the Light. Our testimony is in our eyes. We can't NOT proclaim it. And in that proclamation, and subsequent recognition – people will know who we are, and who we are not. Amen.