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Lesson: John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” ²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” ²²Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” ²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

“He came as a witness to testify to the light.” This is how John the Baptist is introduced to us in the apostle John’s gospel. Witness. Testify. In the lesson it said John confessed. Oddly, this is the language of a courtroom that the gospel writer uses to describe this introduction. Not that John the Baptist was in an actual courtroom. But the writer wants us to hear the case. The writer wants us to be the jury. The truth, though, is that these elements of a courtroom are sprinkled throughout the gospel of John, not just

in this passage that introduces John the Baptist. So what trial is taking place in this gospel? The gospel writer John wants his listeners to deliberate the evidence and the testimony of the witnesses in order to come to a verdict about Jesus. The claim is that this Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, and the reader must cast judgment on the validity of that claim. In one sense, the point of the whole gospel is to convince us of that claim of truth.

“He came as a witness to testify to the light.” The first witness called to the stand is John the Baptist. To start things off, John is asked ...repeatedly by the individuals he encounters... “Who are you?” To establish himself as a credible witness, John starts by saying who he isn’t: the Messiah, Elijah, a prophet. He is none of those. Again he is questioned, “Who are you?” This time he describes what his role is in this drama; what he is called to do in this journey toward reaching the truth. “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” is his response.

After establishing his role in all this, John is finally asked for his testimony, which he freely gives: “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” As is the case with many passages in this gospel, there are multiple levels of meaning to this testimony. Of course John the Baptist was indicating to those questioning him that they do not recognize Jesus for who he is. But John’s testimony, “Among you stands one whom you do not know,” is also a timeless statement. It is a testimony intended to be heard by people of all times and places – including us today – that we can be oblivious to the reality that God is in our midst; It is a testimony that the one through whom all things are created is right here with His creation, yet that creation doesn’t know him; It is a testimony that whenever people can only stare at the ruins of what had once been, the restorer of all things is present. That is the testimony of John in this trial. His is a

testimony that the light of God shines in our midst, yet often it goes unnoticed by us. “He came as a witness to testify to the light.”

We and the whole world need some light. Although there have been good moments and reasons to celebrate, the total of the year has been a dark one. Some comfort and light is appreciated. Our gospel passage harkens back to the prophet Isaiah, which our first lesson today is from. Although these are very comforting words, they were not first spoken without context in mind. The context in Isaiah is that the Jewish exiles have returned from Babylon to find their homeland in ruins. Everything was laid to waste. “Where is God in all this?” they ask. So the prophet speaks the words of our first lesson – it is a poem, truth be told. Isaiah reminds them that God loves justice, and justice shall be seen when these ruins are rebuilt; when the oppressed hear good news; when those who mourn are comforted. Their ruined homeland will be like those shoots that spring up from a dead stump. Their nation is like barren soil that will one day yield a garden. When all seems hopeless, God delivers some hope, and it arrives by the people collectively working together. The promise is that in the midst of the darkness is God’s light. And one day, those who are oppressed and those who mourn will be as mighty oaks of God’s justice who stand tall and display God’s glory.

When we read this as an Advent text, Isaiah 61 is more than just a story of God wanting to heal and to comfort. It is actually a calling to the people of God to be the ones through whom divine justice becomes a reality. Likewise, John the Baptist’s testimony today is good news: “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” That in our own midst, God is here. Even when we don’t realize it, the restorer of all things is among us, present and at work through our collective efforts.

Last week, we spoke of John the Baptist as the harbinger of repentance. This week we focus on a different role of John: the harbinger of the one who restores all

things. Quite often, that restoration is completed by the light of God -- Jesus Christ -- working through us. God's work. Our hands.

Of course witnessing the ruins is no fun, and rebuilding takes time. The whole process wears on us, and it can be easy to overlook the claim that the restorer of all things is present among us. Yet that is the testimony that John the Baptist gives in today's courtroom of sorts. We must judge whether such testimony is true. When we mourn the loss of a loved one, are we comforted by the word that God is somehow present with us? When so many are facing financial ruins, do we find hope in the words that the God of justice will rebuild through us? When we find ourselves in the middle of a stretch of days in which America has never seen so much death, does hearing that the restorer of all things is present in our midst give us the resolve to do all that is within our power to limit the virus' spread?

I wish these questions that John the Baptist raises didn't put the onus on us to answer them, yet that is the role of someone who is supposed to judge the testimony of a witness. The good news is that God's action is not dependent upon how we answer. Even if we aren't convinced whether the light of God is among us or how that light operates, that doesn't change the love and concern that God has for us.

John the Baptist's testimony is that God is not far off and absent from what is going on; God is present. Jesus is with us in the muck of this world and Jesus is that beam of light that no amount of darkness can overcome. Advent is more than just a brief liturgical season. Advent is about anticipation. On the surface Advent is about anticipating Christ's arrival at Christmas. On a deeper level, Advent is about anticipating Christ's return. Yet, at its core, Advent teaches us to constantly anticipate Christ's arrival whenever and wherever there is darkness in our lives and in the world. Christ is among us, even when we do not know it or recognize it. Thanks be to God. Amen.