

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup>He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. <sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" <sup>26</sup>John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

---

The masterpiece of art depicts Jesus on the cross. He is covered in skin sores, and his fingers protrude from his pierced hands in ghastly directions. To his right are three individuals in various states of despair. In contrast to them, there is one person standing to Jesus' left. It is a man with an expressionless face who is simply pointing toward the dying Jesus with a long, bony finger. This man is John the Baptizer. You would be correct in thinking that detail is anachronistic, since the gospels are clear that John died before Jesus. This wasn't a mistake, though. Matthias Grunewald, who painted this famous Isenheim Altarpiece over 500 years ago, had reason to include John in this painting. You see, the focus of the whole painting directs your eye to the depth of Jesus' agony. After that, you see everyone else weeping and wailing, and finally you see John standing there with that

outstretched finger, and you are nearly led to cry out at John, “Do something other than point to Jesus!” Yet, he just keeps pointing us to Jesus, as if saying, “It’s not about me, it’s about him.”

An image of the altarpiece is a part of this morning’s slideshow on the Narthex televisions. The work was commissioned in the early 1500s for a monastery in France. The monks in this monastery were known for being a hospital that provided care for people suffering from the plague and from skin diseases. John stands there, pointing with that long, bony finger in order to help the monastery’s patients see that Jesus shares their afflictions.

That depiction of John the Baptizer constantly pointing to Jesus perfectly fits how our gospel lesson today describes the man. Some religious figures are sent to find out what is going on with this guy who is baptizing people in the wilderness. The encounter plays out somewhat humorously. They start by asking John who he is, and John points away from himself. They bring the conversation back to him, and – once again – he points away from himself.

“Are you the Messiah, are you Elijah, are you the prophet?”

“I’m the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

“Nevermind that. Why are you baptizing if you’re not one of those important people we mentioned?”

“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.”

Try as they might, John is going to keep on pointing to Jesus. So there is some humor in this scene, and yet there is more going on as well: this is a courtroom drama. Of course, this doesn’t take place in a courtroom, but the writer John is playing with the common terminology of a court. He says John the Baptizer “witnessed,” he gave his “testimony,” and he “confessed” to what he knew was true. In fact, the writer John uses judicial terms on multiple occasions throughout his gospel. He does this because, in his view, the reader of the gospel must come to a verdict on whether Jesus was sent by God or not. So, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we begin this session by calling to the stand the one known as John the Baptizer.

There are three main parts to his testimony today. First, John declares that he is not the Messiah. Second, John declares that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” And finally, John declares, “Among you stands one whom you do not

know.” There are many ways to understand and interpret that testimony. Those words were literally true at the time, because Jesus was indeed among them, waiting inconspicuously in the line of people bumping into one another as they prepared to be baptized by John. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” Beyond the literal interpretation of that phrase, there is a message of Advent hope in the statement. Our hope in Advent is that a day and a world is coming that is different from this one. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” We hope and long for God to set things right, yet this proclamation of John is a reminder that God is already at work in our midst. The potential of that long-for day is palpable now. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” This statement says that God is at work in our midst, creating that hoped-for tomorrow with the resources of today, and yet you and I often don’t even recognize it. You would think that it would be impossible for the one who created the galaxies to go unnoticed when doing work among us. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” Then again, no one thought twice that an ordinary carpenter could have been involved in the crafting of the universe. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” Rather than entering this world being heralded by the blast of trumpets like is expected upon the arrival of all the Caesars and Herods, God enters the world and is heralded only by the whispers, the coos, and the laughs of the newborn child’s parents.

“Among you stands one whom you do not know.” The world needs hope. When I recall John’s outstretched, bony finger, I am reminded that it is the church’s duty and the church’s joy to keep pointing. When the patients of the plague and of skin sores gazed upon that finger in the altarpiece, that finger was not scolding them. It also was not badgering them into thinking or believing differently. That finger simply served to say a confession that belongs to the church; “We believe that God understands and shares your afflictions.” That’s the core of this particular confession. Obviously the church has other confessions as well, and quite often we get caught up in all their theology. When we do that, we forget this simple confession that guides our interactions with people who are hurting in this world: “We believe that God understands and shares your afflictions.”

Today – as war, turmoil, hate, disarray, and distrust pervade so much of the world and our day to day lives – the church continues to point to Jesus and says, “We believe that God understands

and shares your afflictions.” That confession does not have a qualifier, as though God understands and shares your afflictions if you are like me and believe like I do. The confession is not a tool to change other people. If the confession is a tool at all, it is for changing the person who confesses it. I imagine that the monks of that monastery could have accomplished a lot of other things with their lives, but their belief that God shares in people’s afflictions changed them in a profound way. It compelled them to devote their lives to caring for people who were suffering and hurting.

This world needs hope. The hope that there is something more to life than being stretched too thin. The hope that someone can withstand the tides of grief. The hope of returned hostages. The hope for meaningful peace to arrive soon. The world needs hope. A central component of Christian theology since the beginning is that God meets people in their pain and in their brokenness. Likewise, for centuries Christians have spoken of their encounters with the divine when they accompanied their neighbor in the experience of pain and brokenness. When we, as the church, proclaim, “Among you stands one whom you do not know,” it is not a judgment against the other person. It is a proclamation that is filled with the hope that God is already present, already working to set things right, even if that work is concealed from our view. We don’t need to attempt to explain it. What we, as Christians, do is imitate John. We simply point to Jesus and declare God’s presence with us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.