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Advent 3, Year B

Be a Witness

These days seem so incredibly hard. Dark nights, whipping winds, torrential rain. Memories of those who no longer sit at the holiday table. Dealing with the unexpected death of loved ones. Another tragedy at Virginia Tech. The season has not yet reached its coldest point, but hearts are already weary. The feel-good television specials, the cheer of Christmas music on the radio, the old but ever present images of a Norman Rockwell Christmas seem to mock the pain. And today, the third Sunday of Advent, is Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is Latin for the word “rejoice” and is the first word in the opening introit for the mass. We light a pink candle on the Advent wreath to remind us to rejoice. In other words, today is supposed to be a little point of joy in the tough season of waiting, of active preparation for Jesus’ return.

The official religious authorities send representatives to interrogate John the witness about his identity. Who are you? I am not the Messiah. Well then are you Elijah? No, I am not. Are you the prophet like Moses who we’ve been waiting on for so long? No I’m not. Well then who are you? What are we supposed to tell our boss? Who do you think you are any way? I am here to point to the Savior for whom you look. It’s not about me. It’s about him. It’s not about me. It’s about how God in Jesus turns the world upside down. The blind see. The captive go free. Those who mourn know great joy. I am a witness. My identity is centered in who Jesus is, what he’s done, and what he’s doing. I guess you want me to be the savior, but I am not the Messiah by any means. I am a witness to the light.

And here we are needing a Savior. Needing release from captivity. Needing rest from violence and destruction. Needing broken hearts to be mended. Needing tears to finally dry out. We can be so needy for such healing that we approach the world with suspicion. Our hearts can be so heavy, our vision so clouded, that we see others suspiciously. We can look so hard for God that we do not see the living God in the everyday. And sometimes we are not desperately seeking a savior. There are moments and days in which we know God and God’s love for us so clearly. A phone call when we needed it. A prayer answered in ways that surprise and delight us. People putting compassion over self-interest. And on these better days, we live our lives in ways that point to God’s love. We can be clear about who we are and who we are not. We can worry less about who people think and be centered in our worth as children of God. We can be witnesses to the light. Where do we find ourselves in the story from today’s Gospel? Are we more like the priests and Levites from Jerusalem who question what God is up to these days? Do we seek a clear answer about the Messiah? Or are we like John? Are we comfortable with the fact that we’re human and not God? Are we doing things that point to the living Christ, that point to God’s love for God’s world? Are we so settled in God’s love for us and our love for God that whatever we do isn’t about our God’s glory?

My guess is that it depends on the day. Some days we are more like the religious authorities and other days we are more like John the Witness. When we seek a Savior, remember that God searches for us. When we raise our fists with questions, God does not

run away. God is right there, standing in line with other ordinary folk to be baptized by his cousin John. God is in the mundane, the everyday, the small things. Perhaps you are wondering about God's presence in your life, in the moments that don't make any sense. If so, know that God is right here in the people who love you, the strangers that puzzle you, and the communion meal we are about to share. If you are seeking the Messiah, the Messiah is seeking you.

Perhaps you connect more with John these days. Maybe there have been moments in your life when you have undeniably witnessed God at work in your life or someone else's. You see that grace and remember that small acts with great love really matter. You are especially aware that life is short, so you think more about how you spend your time. The God moments beckon you to worry less about worldly status and do more for friends, family, the world. When we're more like John, we would stress less about the "perfect gift" and call a friend whose husband is no longer in this world. We would tell our children, our parents, our spouses "I love you" one more time. The mantle might not match the cover of a Martha Stewart magazine, but that doesn't bother you. You just live with no worries of defending yourself from potential hurts or interrogations. You light a metaphorical candle or two everyday because the light of the world burns so clearly that there's nothing else you can do. And if this is where you are, know that the witnessing is a gift. The witnessing is a powerful statement of light in the dark, life in death, joy in mourning.

If you are feeling more like those who questioned John in the story, there is nothing wrong with you. Such questioning, such intense searching is a good thing (although it doesn't always feel that way). Also, remember that those who feel more like John today have probably been or will be in your shoes at some point. When you are desperately seeking the savior or when God's action in the world seems hidden, be patient. Do not try to "fix" your heart. Instead, look for the witnesses to the light. Lean on them. Let their belief carry you in the wilderness. Let the signs sustain you in the waiting. Let yourself be the recipient of some warmth. For the ways in which we witness to the light-the small acts of great love-all point to the great, complete unfolding of the Kingdom of God. A world of righteousness, of right relationship with God and right relationship with our neighbor. A new creation in which all have homes, food, clothing, care, healing, and respect. Mouths filled with laughter and tongues with shouts of joy. This is what we are waiting for; this is what we are working towards with God's help.

Brother and sisters in Christ, we are not the savior and the nights are long, the sadness is deep. On the other hand, we can seek until we are found. We can be a witness. We can light up the night. "All will be well and all manner of things shall be well." And for all these things, we will rejoice today. *Amen.*