

Sermon for Advent III Year A 2020
Hope Changes Us

The gospel of John suggests there are two ways of approaching life and God's presence in the world.

One way is demonstrated by John the Baptist.

The other way is demonstrated by the priests and Levites.

We are either witnesses . . . or interrogators.

John was a witness sent from God.

The priests and Levites were interrogators sent by religious authorities.

“Who are you?” they ask John.

“Are you Elijah?”

“Are you the prophet?”

“Why are you baptizing?”

They know neither themselves nor the One who stands among them.

They are in the dark.

That's how it is with interrogators.

Witnesses, however, are different.

They talk about what they have seen.

They know the light.

John knows who he is . . . but, perhaps more importantly, who he is not.

He claims for himself neither too much nor too little.

That is what makes him a good and credible witness.

He speaks the truth . . . but he is not the truth.

He is illumined . . . but he is not the light.

He is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness . . .

but he is not the Word of God made flesh.

Everything about John points to the light and the life of the One who both stands among us and the One who is—even now—coming into the world.

John will place his life on the line on that.

That's how it is with witnesses.

They live and die based on what they have seen, heard, and experienced.

The real difference between witnesses to the truth and interrogators is this: interrogators demand answers, witnesses offer hope.

More than ever we are in need of witnesses of truth and hope.

We do not need accusations or interrogations.

We need to hear the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness who tells us to “make straight the way of the Lord”—

that is . . . make a pathway so the truth and God’s word have no obstacle or detour in getting into your heart and your life.

John’s is the voice of hope . . .

because he tells us the truth—about us and about God.

His words cut through the wildernesses of our world and our lives.

But John’s voice is not the only voice of hope.

Mary, too, proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

She spoke of the One who shows favor to the lowly, offers mercy, and lends the strength of their arm.

She speaks of the One who fills the hungry with good things and comes to the help of his people.

The prophet Isaiah, long before Mary and John, also spoke truth and hope to the people who wandered in untruth and hopelessness.

The Lord anointed Isaiah to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives

and release to the prisoners.

Isaiah spoke the truth about God’s mercy and grace comforting those who mourn and rebuilding the ruins of their lives.

Isaiah spoke the truth about God’s nature . . .

that our God is a God who loves justice

and whose grace is not a cheap grace that overlooks wrongdoing—

How can we put our faith and hope in God otherwise?

How could his children be clothed in garments of salvation and wear robes of righteousness if God did not make right what is wrong?

John, Mary and Isaiah . . . these are only a few witnesses of hope that we have in our book of faith.

Each of them look at the circumstances of their life and the world and see . . . a greater reality.

They each testify to a life and presence beyond their own.

Within each of their voices is the Word that was in the beginning, the Word that was with God and was God, the Word that became flesh and moved right into the neighborhood, dwelling among us;

the Word that enables us to become children of God . . .

living witnesses of God's grace and truth.

Everything that needs to be said was spoken in the life, death and resurrection of that Word.

That Word is the truth that grounds our hope.

Take a moment and think about the tragedies and difficulties of your life—the death of a loved one, an illness, an addiction, a divorce, the weight of guilt or a sin that separated you from God, others and yourself. Explanations or answers do not sustain us.

How, when, what or why is not what we need to hear.

It is the Word of truth and hope that not gets us through it all.

This truth and this hope does not necessarily make life easy.

It makes life possible.

Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this . . . and coupled with truth, we have the ground to stand on to make the path forward.

There is light and lift coming to us.

Indeed, it is already here among us.

The interrogators of the world, however, make it difficult to hear that other voice . . . the witness of hope and truth.

The interrogators clamor and compete for our attention.

The interrogators want to stir the pot, confound us and confuse us by shouting over the voice of hope and truth.

And yet . . . truth and hope have never been silenced.

So which voice are we listening to?
Which voice do we follow?
These are questions we must answer each and every day . . .
it seems these are questions
we need to answer more now than ever before.
The reality of humanity is that we are a people in the wilderness.
The reality of God is that God is the God of hope and truth.
Do we trust the voice of the wilderness?
Or do we trust the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness?
The voice we listen to is the voice with which we will speak.
We will become either witnesses or interrogators.
And, in our lifetime we will be both.
But it seems we do need to choose which we will be . . .
Witnesses or interrogators.

Speaking truth is not easy.
And hope is not easy.
We need to practice both.
We need to know and speak the truth
if we are not to be just to be blindly optimistic,
not knowing or ignoring what the conditions of
the circumstances and conditions of our own lives
or the circumstances and conditions of the lives of others.
When the Apostle Paul writes that we should rejoice always
and pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances . . .
he was encouraging us to be witnesses
to both the truth of how life actually is
while living in hope because we know the One who is the Truth and the
Life and in whom we place our trust.
Living life in this way . . . holding to these practices makes it possible
for us to both hear and become the voice of truth and of hope.

Interrogators will look at and question the circumstances of rejoicing,
praying, and giving thanks.
Are the circumstances right for such things?

Why rejoice?

Why pray?

Why give thanks?

Is there reason for any of these things?

Interrogators seem to want answers or justifications or reasons but actually what they may be, ironically, trying to do is to silence truth and diminish hope.

Witnesses, however, look beyond the circumstances and focus on God who fills those circumstances.

That is hope.

It opens our eyes to see the One who is already here now but who is still coming into the world.

This is the hope that prepares our heart to welcome the One who comes, bringing good news to the oppressed, proclaiming liberty to the captives, comfort to those who mourn, and healing to bind up the brokenhearted.

Now as ever before,

we need to hear and trust

that our generations' robbery and wrongdoing will not keep God from coming among us

to repair our ruined cities and the devastations we have wrought.

The Lord to whom John and Mary and Isaiah give witness to will clothe us with salvation and righteousness and will cause our gardens to grow.

This hope knows that there is no mountain high enough or valley low enough to keep God away from us.

This is the hope that makes straight the way of the Lord.

Because hope is not a feeling but an orientation and attitude of our life.

It is a way of seeing, of knowing.

Hope allows us to recognize and know Christ, already here and yet still to come.

Hope does not change the circumstances of our life.

Hope changes us and that changes everything.

