

Title: Piercing the Darkness

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, help us be people who bring light to all those around us. Even though we have had our light extinguished at times, rekindle it again, and help us never to be ones to snuff out the light of another. May we be light to the world, and let our light shine, a light we reflect from Christ Jesus, through whom we pray. Amen.

It may be that one of our own challenges is to know who we aren't. There's a story about a woman finding herself alone in an elevator with the famous and handsome Robert Redford. As the elevator moved up the floors, the woman, like many of us might, found herself uncontrollably staring at the movie star. Finally, in her excitement and nervousness, she blurted out: "Are you the real Robert Redford?" To which Redford responded, "Only when I'm alone."

That story reveals that Robert Redford is not simply another pretty face, but he has grown into a wisdom that must serve him well. For like John the Baptist, he obviously knows who he is not.

We all want to put our best foot forward in public when the light shines on us. Redford understood that what people see is not the real Redford. When we are alone, we do not need to rely on our own light. Inviting the light of Christ in our lives, what we see in ourselves when we are alone will be Christ's reflection.

We are reminded this day that the Light is coming into the world. John's gospel is very "Adventy." The Light came in creation. The Light is coming to the Jordan River, Judea, and Galilee. The Light is coming today through the church, which is us.

It gets confusing talking about John the Baptist from John the Evangelist's gospel. Here the evangelist is introducing John the Baptist. John was sent by God. John's gospel opens with creation. John used two metaphors for Christ. Christ is the Word. Christ is the Light. In Genesis, the first act of creation is the Word creating light.

The light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. The light of Christ shined in the abyss of creation. John the Baptist's purpose was to tell people about the light. Being prepared, the people will believe the light when they see it.

Two notes: The first is that John, the gospel writer, employs a lot of legal terms. John the Baptist is not proclaiming, like a preacher would. John the Baptist is testifying as if he were on a witness stand. John, the gospel writer, is not giving a theological argument (though he really is) he is giving a legal argument: Jesus is the light of the world and John the Baptist attested to that proposition.

The second observation is that John, the gospel writer, makes it explicit that John the Baptist is not the light coming into the world. John the Baptist is merely the witness. It is Jesus who is the light. I suppose that John, the gospel writer, would not have to mention this unless there was some confusion about whether or not it was Jesus or John the Baptist who is the light of the world.

Because the church had difficulty converting John the Baptist's followers to Christianity, John the gospel writer makes the point that John the Baptist is not the light. John the Baptist is the forerunner, not the light. The light is the true light. As popular as John the Baptist was, he was not the true light. The true light was coming into the world.

John the Baptist's activities caused a stir in Judea and Jerusalem. The priests were likely not happy that people were being baptized by John instead of by the priests and Levites in Jerusalem. They wanted to know just who this guy was baptizing people in the Jordan. After all, John didn't get any special training. He never went to seminary. He isn't certified and licensed by the state. Just who gave him permission to do what he is doing?

John, the gospel writer, explicitly gives John the Baptist's testimony. The priests and Levites are the prosecutors. (Levites are the assistants to the temple priests. The "Jews" in John's gospel refers to the Jewish religious leaders.)

The first question they want to know is who John the Baptist is. Someone's identity in the ancient world also includes the person's family. One's family

determines one's status in society. They want to know John's pedigree for baptizing people in the Jordan.

John's answer is probably not what they expected. They were concerned about someone doing their job without their permission. John's answer was far more than they bargained for. John the Baptist is not the messiah. They might have accepted John if he was the messiah. But John is saying that he is not a messiah and that he is baptizing without messianic authority. The way John, the gospel writer, puts it is as a confession.

The next question is whether John the Baptist is the great prophet Elijah. The prophet Malachi said that Elijah will come back and announce the coming of the messiah. John denies being Elijah. (But the other gospel writers equate John the Baptist as Elijah.)

So, they next ask John if he is a prophet. John denies being a prophet, though John the Baptist is saying a lot of prophet stuff. The unusual thing is that it had been centuries since there was a prophet in Israel.

All of those questions asked by the priests and Levites would establish John's authority to baptize if he had answered yes to any of them. A "yes" answer could also expose John to political scrutiny that might lead to an arrest, because a yes answer would challenge the authority of the priests and possibly Rome.

Exasperated, the prosecutors then ask John to identify himself. John's prophetic response is from second Isaiah that he is proclaiming a straight path for the Lord. This is an ambiguous response. Chapter 40 of Isaiah makes no claim as to who is going to cry in the wilderness. John is making his claim that he is that messenger.

The quote also seems out of context since second Isaiah was written to give hope to the exiles that they will be restored in Jerusalem. But that already happened. What John the Baptist seems to be saying is that he is preparing the road for the messiah.

The prosecutors were not satisfied with John's answer. Since John was not an acceptable person to be baptizing, in other words, not the messiah, not

Elijah, and not a prophet, then why on earth was he doing all this baptizing stuff?

John plays down the baptisms. It is like he is saying, “You think these baptisms are a big deal? You haven’t seen anything yet. There is one among you whom you do not know. That one is coming after me. I might baptize with water, but I can’t even carry his bucket.”

John, the gospel writer, next tells us where all this took place. It is today in the country Jordan. Jordan’s government has built a park at this site of John the Baptist’s ministry. The next verse we didn’t hear today contains the punch line with John upon seeing Jesus declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

John the Baptist is the lead witness in a trial about the nature of Christ. Jesus is the word, the light, the messiah. The world is a dark place, but God is sending a light into the darkness. In this regard, John the Baptist is a signpost – one through whom we recognize as the word and the light.

John did not come to decorate for Christmas. John did come giving us an example to avoid those who need to put everyone in a category. We are not easy to categorize. We prepare for Jesus by heeding Jesus’ teachings. If we ask, “What would Jesus do?” We are asking the wrong question. What we need to ask is, “What would Jesus have us do?” That will make us a light in the world.

We are to live a transformed life after we bring Christ’s light into our lives. When we invite the light in our lives, the darkness is forced to flee.

Advent is a time when we can ponder faith and hope. Faith is a radical trust in what God is doing – even when we have no idea what God is doing. The light is coming into the world and is indeed in the world and we only “see the light” with faith.

Hope easily falls into the trap of wants: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas. I hope the plane doesn’t crash. I hope for a closer relationship with Jesus. I hope I can understand what Craig is talking about.” There is nothing wrong with these hopes, but they carry baggage. They imply that we don’t know

what to expect from God. The only hope we have, especially in Advent, is that God will arrive, sweeping away all the clutter.

Let us spend this Advent reflecting the light of Christ in a sometimes dark world.

Text: **John 1:6–8, 19–28** (NRSV)

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

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”^g ²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” ²² Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³ 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.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah,^h nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” ²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. ¹

^g Or *the Christ*

^h Or *the Christ*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Jn 1:6–8, Jn 1:19–28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.