

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 17, 2017  
Third Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 65:17-25  
Psalm 126:1-7  
I Thessalonians 5:12-28  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

The mysterious figure of John the Baptist, who was introduced to us last week in our readings, comes into sharper focus today in our Gospel lesson. John, the herald of Christ, appears in the desert. Here he stands for all of us who are in the desert of sin, a lifeless place. It is as though John goes to the desert to remind us of our need for grace.

And as we come to grips with John, we see that *who John is* can best be understood by understanding *who he isn't*.

John is not Elijah returned from the heavens, although like Elijah he dresses in the prophet's attire (cf. Mark 1:6; 2 Kgs 1:8) and like Elijah he preaches repentance and judgment (cf. I Kgs 18:21; 2 Chronicles 21:12-15).

Although John is not Elijah in the flesh, he is nonetheless sent in the spirit and power of Elijah to fulfill his mission. Luke speaks about it this way:

*...he [John] will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the Spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.* (Luke 1:15-17).

So, John is sent in the spirit of Elijah, but he is not Elijah. And neither is he the prophet Moses foretold, although he is a kinsman and he speaks God's word. And he is not the Messiah, though he has been anointed by the Spirit from his mother's womb (cf. Luke 1:15, 44).

*What John does is prepare the way for the Lord* (see Isaiah 40:3). His baptism is symbolic, not sacramental. It is a sign given to stir the people's hearts to repentance.

In his preaching and ministry, John shows us the One upon whom the Spirit remains (cf. John 1:32), the One who fulfills the promise we hear in Isaiah 40 and in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus' bath of rebirth and the Spirit will open a fountain that will purify Israel and give to all a new heart and Spirit.

Zechariah speaks of this when he says:

*On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*  
(Zech 13:1)

Ezekiel speaks of it like this:

*I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you...* (Ezekiel 36:24-26)

John the Baptist reveals this in his promise when he says: “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8)

**This man John comes to us during Advent to show us the light, so that we might believe in the One who comes to us at Christmas.** So often in the Old Testament the prophets are asked to act out some quality of the people, perhaps something they were unable or unwilling to see. Well, this tradition continues here. John acts out for the people their helplessness and neediness before the Lord. But then, like Isaiah, he refuses to leave it at that. He announces that One is coming, one who will baptize with the Spirit.

And the Apostle Paul exhorts us all from the epistle lesson today that we should *rejoice*, give thanks, and pray without ceasing that God will make us holy in spirit, soul and body – so that we may be blameless and ready when our Lord comes.

So on this third Sunday of Advent we light the rose colored candle, and we ponder and call to mind the *joy* that Jesus’ coming brings – not just in the distant past, *but here and now*. The joy that Jesus’ coming brings is a joy that is bigger than our circumstances, deeper than our trials, and more wonderful than our greatest victories. The strength of this joy does not lie in what happens *to us*, but in Who comes to be *with us*. It is wrapped up in that one word that changes everything: *Emmanuel*. God is *with us*.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I remind you that Jesus *came* to us in Bethlehem, and he *is coming* to us on the clouds in great glory at some future moment. But he also comes to us *here and now*, in the bread and wine. He is present *to* us and *with* us, feeding us sacramentally and causing our hearts to rejoice, regardless of our circumstances.

So come with faith. Rejoice, and give thanks. The Lord is near (I mean that in a two-fold sense). Let the joy of his coming be in your heart and on your lips. May we all be ready to greet him when he comes.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.