

Restore us, O GOD; let Your face shine, that we may be healed!
John 1.6-7, 19-28

As we've been hearing in the children's story, "we are *all* on the way to Bethlehem." In addition to the prophets, and Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, John the Baptist also shows us the way. Through the millennia, every year as we journey to Bethlehem, we hear John the Baptist's testimony, his faithful witness to the Light.

We began Advent at the end of the world...and this third Sunday of Advent we're in the beginning...the beginning of the world, of time, of creation. Because that's where John's Gospel begins. This is his birth narrative. The other Gospels begin with the birth of Jesus, beginning the Jesus story with his lineage, with the story of Mary and Joseph, with shepherds and magi. But the birth story for John, the Gospel writer, begins with the Word, the Word of God. His story begins "in the beginning." His story of Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, Jesus, the Light of the world, points us to a reality that has existed since the beginning of time and creation. And in doing so, John's Gospel re-imagines and re-interprets not only the story of the Jewish people, but also our story.

The first person that shows up in John's creation story isn't Adam, but John the Baptist. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him."

And apparently he was a compelling witness! We know this because people came into the wilderness where he was so that they could hear his words. They listened to his testimony and they trusted the Light that he gave witness to. And they knew God's face shining on them. They were restored...liberated...healed. There in the wilderness they experienced the creation of new life.

We know that something profound and out-of-the-ordinary was happening because the community sent priests and Levites, the leaders of the Temple, to the wilderness to investigate. So they went and met with John, and asked him, “Who are you?”

That’s such a great question, so direct, so disarming. With a question like that, there’s little place to hide. (*We who are Swiss German Mennonites could learn from this for when we go to the wilderness to investigate!*)

“Who are you?” And John the Baptist’s response is equally amazing. He answers with a confession, “I am not the messiah.” So they ask if he’s Elijah and again he answers, “I am not.” A third time, “Are you the prophet?” “No.”

John the Baptist is as clear as he can be that he isn’t any part of the messianic hope that is part of his tradition. Like Mary’s pregnancy, that could not be bound by any system or tradition or expectation, John the Baptist also refuses to be tied to the systems and traditions of his community.

“I am not.” This stark statement is quite a contrast to the “I am” statements we’ll hear from Jesus. At one level it seems like a contradiction to Mary’s “Yes...let it be with me according to Your Word.” But rather than being a contradiction to Mary, this Advent story is a complement, the masculine story, if you will. While Mary is pregnant, filling and swelling with new life waiting to be born, John the Baptist is in the wilderness, emptying himself, being emptied. “I am not.” Rather than the fertile womb in the other Gospel stories, this story of the coming of Jesus is a story of subtraction and emptying.

So John has answered “I am not” to each of their “Who are you?” questions. But they need an answer so they have something to report back, so they insist, “Who are you?” This time John answers, “I am the voice of one crying out...shouting in the wilderness.”

“I am the voice.” Of course. Of course he’s the voice! If, “in the beginning was the Word,” of course John the Baptist is the voice. John’s voice is testifying to the Word of God. His voice is testifying to the Life that was Light, to the Light that shines in the darkness. He quotes Isaiah in his answer, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

With these words he’s doing a lot more than just answering their question. Because the wilderness was so formational in this people’s history and tradition, by answering as he did, John the Baptist is recalling the Hebrew narrative. And John the Gospel writer is re-imagining and re-telling the story in a most subtle way. (So subtle that I’m not sure that I’ve got it...but I can point to it...)

The Hebrew words for *wilderness* and *word* are very similar; they share the same root.ⁱ *Wilderness* more literally means *away from words/speech*. In the biblical narrative, wilderness is of course more than about a geographical location. Being in the wilderness is first of all about being in un-inhabited spaces, in wild, untamed and un-domesticated places. Places where there are no words...no speech. In the context of John’s Gospel, in his re-telling of the creation story, the wilderness recalls the “formless void and darkness [that] covered the face of the deep.” And into that chaos, that wilderness, the Word of God spoke, “Let there be light.” And there was light. And the darkness was transformed. The wilderness was now inhabited by the Word of God, the Light of God.

There’s another prominent story that comes to mind: the Word of God, in the form of *torah*, was also spoken in the wilderness. And *torah* made a way for the people of God.

Throughout the history of God’s people, they often found themselves lost or wandering in wildernesses, whether from exodus or exile or return. And into their wilderness, the Word of God re-created their worlds, bringing light and life into what had been despair and

darkness and chaos. God's Word spoke life. God's Word made a way where there had been no way.

And here was John the Baptist, a voice in the wilderness, his words testifying to the Light and Life of the Holy One. Into the current wilderness of occupation and oppression and suffering under the Roman Empire, John was the voice, bearing witness to the Light that gives Life to the world. And the people who heard his words, who listened to his testimony, saw the Light. And where there had been only uninhabitable wilderness and chaos, they now saw a way through. And because God's Word now inhabited their wilderness, they could, once again, inhabit their lives. The face of God was shining on them! And as they passed through the waters of the Jordan River, their baptism washed away the dust and desolation of wilderness. They passed through the waters...restored, liberated, healed.

John the Baptist is showing us the way to Bethlehem. His story is invitation. His testimony is Good News. As we journey, to Christmas and beyond, John's story invites us to be at home in the wilderness. It takes subtraction to get there, to be there, to stay there. But we can live in the wilderness because God's Word has already been spoken and it is here, dwelling among us. It is one thing to see the Light and to experience Life. But it is much harder, and it takes much confession and practice to live lives that bear witness to the Light. To be voices testifying to the Light, we have to journey through the "I am not's" until we get to "I am." It takes considerable subtraction to get to the place where our being and our purpose are testifying to the Light that is in the world.

Mostly we want to *be* the Light. We want to *be* the Life. My human default is to think the wilderness is about me, that it's mine to fix. So I look for ways to shine. I think I'm responsible for restoring, for healing, for saving the world. But what John the Baptist shows

us so powerfully is that we are not the Light. We are not the Word. We are not God. But we *are* inhabited by the Light. We *are* inhabited by the Word. And God's Spirit *is* at home in us and among us, breathing. It is here we find our voice. It is from here that we live as testimonies to the Light that has already come into the world.

The subtraction that John shows us is Good News. When I live as though I am the light, or that I am responsible for the restoration and healing, then I feel the impossible weight of the world with all its chaos and madness. And all I can do is talk about the wildness and the crazy. But when I am not the Light, when I am a voice testifying to the Light, suddenly the face of God is shining brightly.

God's Word dwells...here...now...even in the wilderness. God's Word that is Life and Light has already been spoken into the world. And we, who are inhabited by the Word, it is our vocation, it is our *I am* to testify to the Light. So let us testify! Let us be witnesses to the Light...into the chaos of a proposed ICE detention center in Elkhart County, into the wilderness of systemic racism in the City of Elkhart...let us testify to the Light! Into the wasteland of endless war and into the formless void of climate change...let us testify to the Light! Into the violence and oppression of apartheid Israel and gendered violence and white supremacy in our country...let us testify to the Light! And in the wilderness of our own pain and brokenness, into our breaking hearts, let us be voices with each other and for each other, bearing witness to the Light that is already in the world.

Come, let us testify to the Light! Let us walk in the Light...the Light that is already in the world. And as we walk, may we trust that where there is no way, God *will* make a way...a way of restoration...the way of liberation....the way of healing.

ⁱ The relationship between *midbar* – *dbr/wilderness* – *speech*: Richard Swanson
<https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2017/12/11/a-provocation-third-sunday-of-advent-december-17-2017-john-16-8-19-28/>