

## **December 17, 2023 - Advent 3**

### **Prayer of the Day**

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the words of your prophets, that, anointed by your Spirit, we may testify to your light; through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading - John 1:6-8, 19-28**

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. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ...

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

They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

### **Sermon**

“Among”

Says John

In the middle of

In the midst of

With

Part of the group

Part of the community

Part of the family

In the thick of things

Not separated

Not at a distance

In the middle of

With

Among

“Among *you*”

Says John

To the crowds

To his hearers

To those whom he had just baptized

To those coming for baptism

Yes

But even more

To his inquisitors

To his doubters

To his detractors

To those who didn't accept his message without question

Those who wouldn't or couldn't go into the water with him

Who wanted proof

Who wanted credentials

Who wanted authorization

To his enemies?

Maybe

But not necessarily

Maybe they just couldn't wrap their heads around this guy  
Maybe they simply couldn't understand him  
Maybe they had legitimate expectations  
Which John didn't meet  
Or which he challenged simply by being who he was  
And they wouldn't or couldn't let go of them  
Without some kind of confirmation  
Some kind of affirmation  
Some sense of where they were *going*  
Before they could let go of where they *were*  
Or had *been*

Among you  
Not just among friends  
Not just among believers  
But among the questioners  
The wonderers  
The doubters  
The half-convinced and unconvinced  
And even the bewildered

Among you  
*All* the "you's"  
Which surrounded John  
Who listened to John  
Who heard John

And even those who didn't  
Or wouldn't  
Or couldn't

"Among you *stands*"  
Says John  
Stands  
Stands *now*  
Present tense  
A current reality  
An event which is taking place  
Even as the words are spoken

Not "will stand"  
Not "might stand"  
Not "could stand"

"Stands"  
Here  
Today

The words "Among you stands" are an announcement  
A prophetic proclamation  
Which lights the candles  
Which turns on the lights  
Which introduces potential  
Which makes 'the new' not only possible  
But probable

Certain even  
Occurring in the present moment

The words “Among you stands” are an announcement  
And *also* are a *promise*  
Which points, in part, to the history of the Jewish people  
The covenant made with Abraham and Sarah  
With Moses and Miriam  
A covenant of companionship  
Of guidance  
Of journeying “with”  
A covenant which continues  
Each and every moment  
Each and every day  
Each and every lifetime

Which affirms that this promise not only looks back  
It looks forward  
To a new thing  
A new way of being God’s people  
New *ways* of being God’s people  
In which ritual becomes sacrament  
And sacrament becomes identity  
And identity becomes mystery

A mystery which is revealed  
In the mystery of presence  
Presence in the past  
Presence in the present  
Presence in the future

The words “Among you stands” are an announcement  
They are a promise  
*And* they are an invitation

Extended to John’s hearers  
To the crowds  
To those who were listening  
To those whom he had just baptized  
To those coming for baptism  
Yes

But even more  
To his inquisitors  
To his doubters  
To his detractors  
To those who wouldn’t or couldn’t take his word for it

The words “Among you stands” are an invitation  
To begin looking for the light shining in the fog  
To start listening for the sound of a fog horn in the distant night  
To begin paying attention to the people around them  
And to become a bit more aware of the mystery inside all

“Among you stands  
The One  
One who is far beyond me”  
John says  
Far beyond *any*, actually  
Who is so far beyond us

That this One is hiding in plain sight  
Is able to move among us without our noticing  
(If we choose to be intentionally blind)  
And can take shape in the ordinary  
The humdrum  
The ultimately ignorable

The One who is so “other”  
That **our** “others”  
The ones **we** consider “other”  
(The poor, the stranger, the refugee, the racialized, the sexualized)  
Are considered suitable vessels  
To hold the mystery of divine presence

John speaks  
To the people who came to listen  
The people who dared to hope  
The people who were so desperate  
That they would go into the water with this guy  
Who spent his days crying out in the wilderness

John speaks  
To the people who came to question  
Who wore their suspicion on their sleeves  
Who had already written him off  
Or who just plain weren’t sure yet

And John speak just as clearly  
Just as passionately  
Just as provocatively  
To us

Whether we are partners with those  
Who came to listen  
Or to question  
Who came to be inspired  
Or who came to argue  
Who came hoping against hope  
Or who came having already made up their minds  
Or even given up

“Among” says John  
In the middle of  
In the midst of  
With

“Among **you**” says John  
To the crowds  
To his hearers  
To his inquisitors  
To his detractors

“Among you stands” says John  
Stands **now**  
Present tense  
A current reality  
An event which is taking place  
Even as the words are spoken

In the final month of 2023  
In the shops and restaurants  
In the streets and avenues  
In the bedrooms and classrooms  
And even here in our uncomfortable pews

Among you stands  
One who has come  
One who comes  
One who is coming

The One who is so “other”  
That we probably won’t even see  
Let alone recognize  
That Presence

But who  
In the mystery of the love of God  
Has still come  
Is still coming  
Will still come

Even to us  
Amen

### **Prayers of the People**

A - Beginning again, we trust the promise that we will be heard as we offer our prayers.

*[Short pause]*

A - We pray to the One who stands among us, announcing that there are new ways of being God’s people. May we be open to the possibilities. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - We pray to the One who stands among us, promising that “holy Presence” is the reality in which we live, in which we work, in which we die, and in which we rise. May we hold to that assurance. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - We pray to the One who stands among us, inviting us to admit our hesitation and our skepticism. May we respond with love, to the love that will not let us go. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - We pray to the One who stands among us, calling us as church to be a community which embraces the Others around us. May we be generous in our welcome. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - We pray to the One who stands among us in the sick, the lonely, the unknown, the invisible, the forgotten. May we become more aware of the people around us, those we name before you, and those who remain un-named.

*[Long pause]*

God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - We pray to the One who stands among us. May we listen for the voices of those in *our* wilderness who are announcing, promising, and inviting today. May we be open to hearing them, and may we join them in pointing to the mystery of Presence which fills creation. God who comes,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.