

Here is John again. Still no word of angels, shepherds, dreams or a birth. The middle two weeks of Advent are always John's, who comes to prepare the way for the one who is coming after him.

Last week we heard from a rather gentle John, the baptizer, in the Gospel according to Mark. He is part of the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: Repent. Change your mind.

Today in the Gospel according to John, again, John (not the Gospel's writer) gives no tongue-lashing, calls no one vipers, etc. In today's Gospel John is, simply "a man sent from God whose name was John." He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way"

The Gospel reading sounds seamless, but Lectionary snips him out of the Gospel's Prologue. As if he could or would stand all on his own. He wouldn't; doesn't. As if some early editors might have made a mistake in patching him into the midst of the Prologue's poetry and symbolism. He belongs there.

John is embedded in the Prologue. His story is interwoven with the story/poetry of the Word, the cosmic and eternal:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 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. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
(1:1-9)

As the Word is sent into the world, becoming Word-made-flesh, so, too, John is , as a witness to testify to the light.

New Testament scholar Gail O'Day writes that the symbolic language of the Prologue is meant "to invite [us] out of [our] everyday world and into a world shaped only by the presence of God and the Word."

We, meanwhile, are busy and intent on trying to shape this world to our liking, to make up our own story.

O'Day writes, "God's story is wholly other, a story that begins when human beings are not even in the picture."¹

John is right here in the midst of the symbolism, the first human being in the Gospel. He comes telling what he sees, in the hope that we will see it, too. In this Gospel, it's all about light and darkness, seeing and not seeing, understanding what is revealed, right in front of you, or not. Light is more than external—shining on—light is also shining within, enlightenment.

Why does such light need a witness to testify to it? The light shines. Can people not see it?

On our own we seem unable to recognize it much of the time. “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” Even John says, of himself, “I myself did not know him.” Says it twice (1:31, 33). This even though he came that this One coming after him might be revealed. John himself was prompted by God: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” And he testifies: “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him.”

Some read the Gospel according to John as one long trial, of John and Jesus, culminating in trial before Pilate. *Prove to us who you are, why you're here, doing what you're doing. Because we're doing fine on our own, thank you, doing things our own way according to our own lights.*

We don't have to look far to see that we, collectively, the human race, are not doing so well following our own lights. Ours is still a chaotic, conflicted, violent world. Darkness and death are all around.

The world longs for a witness, a voice that is congruent—as John is congruent with God and himself. He knows who he is and who he is not. The world longs for a voice that is clear, truthful, consistent.

The next day (after the second piece of our Lectionary passage) John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (1:29)

The sin, not the sins. Not the multiplicity of our individual wrongs—all the things we have done and have left undone. The sin of the world; our collective alienation from God, turning our back, separating ourselves, caught up as a whole in darkness and death.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The darkness of the world, darkness and death, did not overcome the light. The light shines in the darkness, still.

In the darkness, John points to the light so that we might see it, too.

Here is the one coming into the world to shine light on all the darkness and death that separate us from God, each other and ourselves. The light shines to reveal—both to expose and to guide. To expose so that we might realize our alienation and indifference to the goodness and love at the heart of the universe. To guide so that we might turn towards the light, the Word-

made-flesh, and follow him. Here is the one who did not live or die on our own terms, by our lights; who overcame darkness and death not by force or violence but in vulnerability and love. Here is the one who has come among us to make a new relationship between God and human beings, and to show the way into life.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is a day of rejoicing on the calendar—Gaudete, Rejoice Sunday. The third candle on the Advent wreath is pink, lightened from blue (or purple) to signal that the feast of the Incarnation is drawing near. While the darkness outside continues to grow, in here the light expands.

The witness of John is in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, anointed and sent by God to bring good news of broken hearts mended, of liberty and release, jubilee and comfort. Images of rejoicing abound: garlands, the oil of gladness, the bridegroom and bride bedecked, the fruitfulness of earth and garden.

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always . . . give thanks in all circumstances” Even in the dark.

The psalm celebrates God’s restoring the people, who respond with laughter in their mouths, with shouts and songs of joy. “We are glad indeed.”

We are glad indeed, as John points us to the light of the world through whom God has restored humankind. Let our gladness shine in our lives and be our testimony to the one who has come, and comes again.

1. Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hylen, *John* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006), 25.