

Advent 3-B  
St. John's Cathedral  
December 16-17, 2017

Holy Hubert was a fixture in Berkeley when I lived in the San Francisco Bay area in the late 1960s. Hubert was a street preacher – a powerful man with a pock-marked face. He wore a shiny blue suit and a white shirt frayed at the collar. He waved a well-worn leather-bound Bible.

He always drew a crowd and the message was always the same. Repent. He was convinced that most of the university students were doomed to hell and wasted no time telling them just that. There was nothing kind or gentle about him – at least as I saw him on the street. He shouted at the people who gathered around. Some of them shouted back. Some people came to hear his preaching; some came out of curiosity; others came to heckle him.

I'm not sure anyone was ever converted by Hubert's preaching. It was laced with gloom and doom – not a shred of hope. It most mostly browbeating.

I always think of Hubert in Advent when we meet John the Baptist, mostly because of the contrast. Last week our gospel reading from Mark introduced him to us as a rough character, wearing kind of a buckskin outfit and eating locusts and wild honey. He sort of lurches into the scene in Mark, abruptly calling people to repentance, but also calling them to hope.

This week the gospel according to John introduces us to a sort of kinder, gentler John the Baptist. Here he is one who points toward the light who is the coming Messiah. Here is how Eugene Peterson translates this in *the Message*:

“There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the light; he was there to show the way to the light.”

The people who gathered around John apparently had a hard time figuring out who he was and what he was doing there. “Who are you, anyway?” they keep asking. “Are you the Messiah? One of the prophets?” Tells us, because we have to report back to the people who sent us.

John, a powerful preacher with a powerful message, most likely had a pretty large following in his own right. There were probably some people who thought he might be the Messiah. So he had to be clear with them that he was not. Instead, he was there to direct their attention to Jesus.

When we look at John, we see him as a herald of light and hope who preached to people in great need of hope and expectation. The people of the Judean countryside who came to be baptized had awaited the Messiah for a long time. They lived in complicated and difficult times politically, economically, religiously. We can see how John’s message was so compelling as he opened a window to hope.

When I was on the diocesan staff I attended a conference for consultants to congregations who helped them through transitions in leadership. A lot of our conversation was around what were the most important parts of our ministry. One of the speakers reminded us again and again that there are certain things that people can’t live without – and at the very top of that list is a sense of hope – a sense of faith that the future holds something for us.

In the gospel, John the Baptist points to the future and to the coming messiah, saying, The one who is coming is greater than I. He saw that hope, that future, in the coming of Jesus. This was good news.

John the Baptist called his hearers to anticipate something new – something revolutionary and great in the coming of Jesus. Our Advent journey calls us to the same kind of anticipation as we work our way toward Christmas.

One theme that comes up repeatedly in today's gospel reading – one that is an ongoing image in the Gospel according to John – is light. That's an even more poignant image for us at this time of the year as our days grow shorter and our nights grow longer. As we experience the cold and dark of the winter season, our longing for light in the literal sense is all the stronger. And as we move through these reflective days of Advent and move toward Christmas, we await the coming of the light – as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We wait as the people of God, a people of hope. We long for the light to come into our lives.

Certainly we know that life is not perfect or idyllic for us or for the rest of the world. We, too, live in complicated and difficult times. We're also aware of a spiritual emptiness that many feel – a longing for connection, a longing for the holy.

How, we wonder, do we live as bearers of the light – as people of the light?

I don't think a simple cheerfulness is an answer. As we move through this season of Advent anticipation, of quiet reflection, we're also bombarded with the frenetic preparations for Christmas –shopping and wrapping and decorating and feasting. One Advent I spent an hour at my dentist's office enduring bouncy Muzak Christmas music – “Holly Jolly Christmas” –“Jingle Bell Rock” – and the like. It was driving everyone

crazy who worked there, but no one could turn it off. As I sat there, I thought about all of the packages I needed to get into the mail; about the stack of Christmas cards that hadn't been addressed; about the challenge of climbing on a ladder in the snow and ice to adjust the Christmas lights on my garage. There isn't anything really wrong with any of these things – even the Muzak – but they are symptomatic, I think, of a disconnect of this season.

How does this all come together? The call of this season to be reflective? The pain in our world? The goofiness and frenzy of Christmas preparations? The call to bear witness to the light? The Advent waiting?

One way to see this is to see our own call to be bearers of the light as tied up in a deep faith in the Lord who came and is to come again. To serve that Lord with all that we have and with generosity and compassion.

A portion of a prayer from Ted Loder sums it up well:

Lord of Life and Light, help us not to fall in love with the darkness that separates us from you and from each other, but to watch large-eyed, wide hearted, open-handed, eager-minded for you, to dream and hunger and squint and pray for the light of you and life for each other.

Lord, amidst our white-knuckled, furrow-faced busy-ness in this season, we realize deep within us that your gifts of mercy and light, peace and joy, grace upon grace can be received only if we are unclenched open.

So this is our prayer, Lord. Open us! Gentle us open, pray, shock, tickle, beguile, knock, Amaze, Squeeze any wily way you can open us. Open us to your glory in the coming again of the light of each day.

amen

May you and I have the grace to be open to the light that is the Christ and to share it with wild abandon.