

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 11, 2016  
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## **The First Evangelist?**

When we hear the word “evangelist,” many of us think about the preachers who appear on TV. In fact, “evangelical” is often used to describe a certain segment of Christianity that might even be linked with a conservative political position.

Biblical scholars using the word “evangelist” would probably be talking about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the writers of the four gospels. Simply defined, an evangelist is one who shares the “good news” of God’s love in the person of Jesus Christ. All Christians are called to be evangelists – sharing the story of Jesus.

Advent begins our evangelical witness. As the signs proclaim, “Jesus is the reason for the season.” The lead-up, the build-up to Christmas should always point to God’s love coming to this world in a radical new way with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, long ago. Yet we can live as Advent people in every season, all year long, knowing that God comes to us, daily; and Jesus is born in the power of God’s love each and every day.

Since this Advent evangelical good news is the ongoing story of the Church’s life, at Grace Church we are blessed to have this statue of John the Baptist with us all the time. I call John the Baptist the first evangelist, the first to call Jesus “Messiah,” “the Lamb of God;” the first to proclaim the good news of God’s love in the person of Christ and to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God to break into the world through the life of Jesus.

As the first evangelist, John points to Jesus. This is a model for all of us, to point to Jesus. John links the tradition of the Old Testament prophets to Christ’s message of the “kingdom of heaven.” Jesus says that John is “more than a prophet.” John is a messenger of God preparing the way for the Messiah, Jesus.

John’s ministry of preparation reminds us of ours – in the Church and individually. Advent is the season of preparation, yet in Advent we can discover that our entire lives are a series of preparations, to meet Christ, to see Christ, to make Christ known. Each and every one of us prepares for what comes next. We prepare for new opportunities to see God’s love born in our world.

This is really the beauty of life in our parish. Watching children discover and learn about God’s love as they prepare for adulthood; sharing with young adults the challenges of professions and relationships, preparing them for careers and families; helping adults in mid-life to prepare for a future with marriage, children, work and the demands of active lives; supporting our seniors in times of great transition with retirement, downsizing, the demands of failing health, the coming of physical death. Our lives are a continual Advent, seasons when we can always prepare and look to the coming of Christ in new and unexpected ways.

John reminds us of the three important activities necessary in our seasons of preparation, this Advent and throughout life.

First, we are called to wait and watch; technically we might call this discernment – to wait and watch for God’s revelations, God’s signs, and God’s messages. Waiting and watching call for emotional and spiritual maturity. Waiting and watching help us to avoid rash decisions and quick, easy judgments. Waiting and watching come with silence – silence in our hearts and minds; silence from God. Waiting and watching come as darkness increases. Waiting and watching take place in solitude and in community. John waited and watched in the desert.

And then, there is a call to action, to change. The word that John and Jesus use is “repent.” Turn your life, turn your world around. What needs to change? The Baptist challenged the Pharisees and scribes – religious leaders – to change. He called for Herod, the ruler, to change. Soldiers, tax collectors, everyone could find something about their lives, their world that needed to change. To live is to change. What needs to change in our lives?

Lastly, John shows us that in preparing for Christ and God’s love we must face our fears and understand our doubts. John the Baptist, the first evangelist, asks the question we all must ask, “Jesus, are you the one?” Is Jesus the Son of God? It’s the question the disciples will ask. It’s the question the Chief Priest and Pontius Pilate will ask. It’s the question you and I must ask, “Who is Jesus?”

I’m sure that John knew Herod arrested him in order to eventually silence him, execute him. So as John waited and watched for his own death, as John lived his last days in prison, he had real questions, real doubts. Jesus was not the Messiah John expected. The Kingdom of God had not triumphed over Herod’s rule or Jewish traditions. Jesus’ preaching was not going to save John from having his head chopped off.

Our faith undergoes many challenges in our lifetimes. Some years ago a Christian educator wrote about our three stages of faith: 1. faith given, 2. faith questioned, 3. faith owned. Even those of us in the faith owned stage will be challenged by life events. We will have to find new answers, stronger answers, and clearer messages when we ask, “Are you the one?”

This is the real question when darkness descends, when the light fails, when the silence is overpowering. After waiting and watching, after changing, there may come the “dark night of the soul.”

Jesus answered John. And Jesus will answer us. We live with this hope. After all, Advent is a season of hope, hope in the coming of God’s love, coming to us in times of greatest darkness. John the Baptist, the first evangelist, shows us that a life of preparation is a life of hope.