

"The One Among Us"

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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The Third Sunday of Advent

Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word, we may see and experience Jesus the Christ, in our midst. We ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

If you are paying attention, this week's Gospel reading from John sounds very much like last week's reading from Mark. At least that's what I thought when I first read today's lesson. Upon a more careful reading, however, they are different in terms of what they emphasize. Whereas Mark introduced us to the prophetic John the Baptist, John's Gospel features the more philosophical John the Baptist—the one who is portrayed as perhaps appealing to those first century Greek, philosophical minds and trying to help them comprehend what was about to take place. And so he speaks about the light that has come into the world and about the word being made flesh. This one who is coming is unlike all others, he proclaims. So watch for it and be prepared when it happens.

One of Advent's great themes in addition to waiting, is watching, which is in no way a passive exercise. It's about watching in expectation that something is going to happen. You are not sure what it is, you are not sure when it will happen, just that it will and you don't want to miss it when it does. John the Baptist is warning us of the danger of missing it.

And his expressed notion that, "Among you stands one whom you do not know," is a reoccurring theme in the fourth Gospel. Time and again, Jesus will encounter those who don't understand who he is or who fail to recognize the very one in their midst. There was Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night seeking wisdom, and the Samaritan woman at the well who understood the words but not their meaning. There are the high priests and religious authorities who understand him only as a threat to their power and control. Even his disciples consistently reveal their misunderstandings about who he was. And of course later in the fourth Gospel is that haunting scene where Pilate and Jesus are alone, looking at each other and Pilate asks Jesus in all earnestness, I believe, "What is truth?"

In addition to paying attention, it seems to me, at the very least, is the message in John that no one claiming that name which is above all other names should act smug or with too much certainty when it comes to understanding completely who he is. No one individual and no one form of religious expression, whether organized or wildly unorganized, should ever claim a unique corner on truth to the exclusion of all others.

Because God's presence and work in the world is always unpredictable and surprising, and in the birth and life of Jesus we should understand that. Because in the one whose birth we are preparing to herald, Jesus represents many different things and each is different and all are accurate.

He's innocence wrapped in swaddling clothes and a threatening revolutionary. He's a healer and a savior and a teacher and dispenser of wisdom. He's a spiritual leader and an agitator. He's a martyr and a mystery and all of these are true and each is different.

Before reading scripture and preaching a sermon I often pray for God to startle us. Startle us, O God by your presence. But startle us as well with some new word or revelation, some new insight or even a nudging reminder toward a profound truth we already know to be true but had somehow lost sight of. Come, O God, and startle us by your presence.

And spiritually, I think that's how it works, for the most part. That more often than not we are surprised and caught off guard by divine encounters rather than we are to experience them in those conjured up, contrived and prescribed settings.

And encountering God's presence in the world is often startling because it is rarely discovered in the places most people go looking. Sometimes God can be experienced in the sublime and the lovely, the exquisite and the beautiful. But I think more often it happens in contexts far removed from those safe settings.

It takes place when you don't expect it and where most others are not looking. It happens in simple and quiet gestures of compassion, and can be experienced in those who carry themselves with a dignity and loveliness the world doesn't recognize or frankly appreciate. And it frequently happens in corners of the world so dark, twisted and cold, that even the appearance of a little light seems to pierce it and warm it with a power unlike anything else.

My good friend Barrie Shepherd is a Scottish Presbyterian minister who is also a wonderful poet. He wrote a poem based on an encounter he had one time on Holy Saturday—the day before Easter. It's entitled, "Holy Saturday at the Green Market," and I think it captures the way it often works.

I think I caught the risen Christ,
just yesterday, on Broadway alongside Union Square.
We were returning from the Green Market
-fresh fish, green mesclun with a pinch
of bright and edible nasturtiums tossed on top,
some tiny new potatoes for our evening meal-
when I glimpsed ahead a shambling, awkward figure
lurching his twisted way along the sidewalk
and jerking fiercely now and then as if in seizure.
He wore a red baseball cap slightly off center,
sweat shirt, jeans, sneakers—all shabby
but well cared for, clean—and over his right arm
a cardboard carton with the lid cut off to shape
a sort of basket, I suppose, to display wares.
I glanced in as we passed and sure enough
there were ball-point pens, other plastic items
in there waiting to be purchased. Silent-
in my head—I wondered at the courage of one
so violently deformed, yet coping, contriving
to survive this predatory city.

Those contorted legs could not move him
that fast and we were swiftly past him to confront,
laying across a heap of trash bags up against the wall,
a homeless man, asleep, with the usual pathetic sign
informing all and sundry:
I'm in trouble, please help. Someday
I may be able to do the same for you.

I walked on, ignored both plea and promise,
passed right by as I've been taught to
by this casual, careless, care-less cruel city;
then glancing back over my shoulder saw our friend
in the red baseball cap struggle across ,
laboriously read—how long it seemed to take—
that grubby and ill-lettered sign, then lean
over and drop something in the cup.

Yes, I realize, it only encourages. I know
they'll likely spend it on booze. I've heard
and lived these arguments, knowing far too much,
believing far too little, and being so afraid,
for years now. But there was something in
that simple act, an eastered innocence
put me to shame, drove me to my knees
among the sidewalk lily vendors.
I think I saw the risen Christ,
a day early, but there just the same,
on Broadway yesterday alongside Union Square.

I don't remember who said it but I remember hearing it and being startled by the simple and yet profound truth of these words: No one rejects God, only the way in which God has been portrayed to them.

And it's a rather humbling and daunting thing to consider that we have a role to play in others experiencing God's power and presence in the world. Those lovely lines in a communion prayer found in our *Book of Common Worship*, come to mind,

As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.

Or perhaps you can recall the famous saying by Teresa of Avila,

Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.

And St. Francis was right when he said, "We are the moon reflecting the rays of the sun from our surface."

The Incarnation—God's coming among us in the person of Jesus Christ, is a gift that frankly comes with strings attached. It is a gift that we need to accept but then also live into by making God's love and grace known those we come in contact with. We have real work to do.

When she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Mother Teresa said in her acceptance speech,

It is not enough for us to say: "I love God, but I do not love my neighbor." Saint John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you don't love your neighbor. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor whom you do see, whom you touch, with whom you live?

And then she said,

If now we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten how to see God in one another. If each person saw God in his neighbor, do you think we would need guns and bombs?

She's right, of course. And when Jesus commanded us to feed our hungry neighbors, it was as much for our neighbor's sake as it was for our own, because while we may not realize it, we too are starving and will starve to death if we don't give of ourselves in ways that are meaningful to those in this world who God also loves and who stand in need.

Among you stands one whom you do not know.

"Lord, when did we see you hungry and not feed you or sick and not care for you?"

In as much as you failed to do it to the least of these, you failed to do it to me.

And it seems to me that Advent invites us watch and pay attention so as never to miss the Christ in our midst. Because it's so easy to do, especially this time of year with its many distractions.

Even before the promised one came among us, John the Baptist proclaimed it. But John was the messenger, not the message. He baptized with water which is not the same as being baptized with fire. John the Baptist was not about self-promotion but instead, understood that he had a subservient role to play in God's redemptive plan for the world. John knew that he himself was not the light but that he was to instead point others to the light—the true light. And we are called to do the same.

And he rightly warned everyone, "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

People of God, during this Advent season but really, in all of life, may we wait and watch in order to receive the great gift of being startled by God's presence—and then startle others by it as well.

Amen.