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Sermon: "Announcing Hope" (John 1: 6-8, 19-28)

December 28, 2014

Another Christmas Day has come and gone. We may have bought presents, received cards, baked cookies, visited relatives or gone to parties. But what now? What do we take away from this past December 25th? Do we just return to our normal, everyday lives? Do we go right back to our routines as usual? Or do we take a lesson from John the Baptist.

Our scripture for today introduces us to who John the Baptist is, and is a scripture typically used during Advent to introduce us to who we will be after the coming of Christ.

When the priests ask John, *Who are you?* He answers with a string of "nots". He is **not** the Messiah. He is **not** the prophet, Elijah. We are told that John himself was **not** the light . . . BUT that "he came to testify to the light."

But why is John so elusive in his answers? When the priests ask him who he is, why doesn't he just say "Hi, my name is John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah"? Is he just playing games with their heads? I don't think so. I think it's because he is so focused on the one he proclaims, that his entire identity has become "witness" and "preparer of the way."

This is an especially important example for us today because, as I'm sure many of you have heard from polls and news stories over the last several years, mainline Protestant churches are declining in membership. Now, pundits and preachers alike debate the nature and significance of this decline, but the reality remains that in some respects, we've lost our voice. We've lost the piece of our voice that speaks to why we do all this stuff for Christmas in the first place—why do we give gifts and send cards? Why do we make the extra effort to see family and friends? Why do we have our children act out the birth narrative every Christmas Eve?

We may not always think about it in these terms, but perhaps taking part in these ritual acts around the holidays is our way of demonstrating who we are. We may not demonstrate who we are by testifying in the same way as John, but what we can take from his testimony is the fact that, what we know about who we are is somewhat established by knowing who we are not. We

live in a dark world, and as much as we might wish it were otherwise, we, like John, are not the light. No matter how much we want to be, no matter how hard we try, we are not able to be all that our hurting world needs.

And therein lies the hope of Christmas that we should carry forward with us every day. It's not always easy to see, but for fear that we be tempted to make a permanent home in who we are *not*, and get caught up in the trap of low expectations and limited responsibility, the second part of John's proclamations clarify the first: "I am not the light, but I am called to testify to the light." Or in other words, we are not the stars of the show- Jesus is – but there is joy in the supporting role.

Every year on this first Sunday after Christmas we are reminded that we too are called to take up John's mission to announce to a dark and troubled world that the light of Jesus Christ has come! We know that Light, of course, always shows up best in darkness. And so for us, to take up John's mission is to testify to tell our truth, the whole truth, and to be held accountable for what we know and see. We serve God not by trying to be what we are not, but instead by being ourselves—people who can call themselves witnesses to the light because we have seen it shine in our very own darkness.

It gets harder and harder to see the way ahead, especially it gets darker earlier in the day and the year draws to a close. We are not privileged to see the view from the hill, and the way of the world makes no sense from here most of the time. But as the famed theologian Howard Thurman reminds us, the work of Christmas begins now:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.*

***To be a witness to the light. Amen.***