

A man sent from God

A sermon by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2008.

He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1: 8

By all accounts, John the Baptist is a rare and eccentric figure. He lives a strict ascetic life out in the desert wilderness, dressed in animal skin and subsisting on locusts and wild honey. His mission is to be the herald of the Christ. Because he is so dynamic a figure, John easily attracts attention and is aware that he must avoid letting people think that he is the Christ. John's strength is in the fact that he always points beyond himself to Jesus and never pretends to be anyone other than who he is.

John is focused on calling people to turn their lives around. He knows how difficult that can be. He urges us to examine our lives and change our behavior to save us from being our own worst enemy. He baptizes with water, but Jesus, the anointed one of God, baptizes with the power of the Holy Spirit. John's preaching is effective. He speaks with conviction. He challenges us to make the necessary changes to get into a right relationship with God. That may even mean starting all over again. But it can be done.

As the herald of Christ, John the Baptist is the ultimate advance man and stage manager. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the "voice crying in the wilderness." He is a man sent from God to bear witness to Christ. Like a stained glass window, John always lets the light shine through.

When the leaders of the religious establishment question his authority, John makes it clear that the One who comes after him is greater than he, whose sandal he is not worthy to untie. The priests and Levites question not only his authority, but also his right to baptize if he is not the Messiah. John explains that he baptizes not on his own, but on God's authority and is humbled that Jesus asks to be baptized by him to set an example for all of us.

One of the great issues of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century was the very question of authority. The reformers taught that we are given authority by our baptism to have direct access to God without having to go through any human authority. This means that no one can stand in the way of our having a personal relationship with God in Christ. The word "protestant" means to testify for what we believe. Each of us must discern our own understanding of God's will and intent for us. None of us acts on our own strength, only on God's power working in and through us. Our attempts at testifying to our own personal experience with God may not always be as eloquent as John's, but it is our call to witness to Christ wherever we are.

The call to make the paths straight is a metaphor for straightening the ways we are traveling that are unsafe, whether in marriage, business, or in the excesses of daily living. The dangerously sharp curves of sin and self-destruction must be straightened out to lead to our healing and redemption.

Years ago, I visited a man in a hospital who smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and was dying of lung cancer. When I asked if there was anything I could do for him, he only wanted a smoke. I checked with the nurse who assured me that at this stage it wouldn't make any difference. Nonetheless I felt a deep sadness as it lit the cigarette he inhaled with great satisfaction. It was his last smoke. He died the next day.

Another man whom I had known for many years became obvious that he had a drinking problem. I urged him to get help, but he eventually drank himself to death. When I visited his widow, she asked me to take a bag to the dump. I thought that was a strange request until I got there and found inside sixteen empty bottles of gin. When I asked her how long it took for him to consume that much, she said that it only took a week. We all need to discern the hazards of unhealthy habits, lest we proceed at our own peril down the path of self-destruction.

Shakespeare wrote in his play, *As You Like It* that all the world's a stage, each with our own entrances and exits. We learn our lines and choreograph our patterns on and off stage. In the drama of life, God is the only director with ultimate authority to guide and direct us. We encourage each other in doing our very best in each of our roles.

We live in an age of "Christmas.com," as we order gifts over the internet. While this may help to ease frayed nerves, it still results in maxed out credit cards. Those who live with seasonal depression aren't able get into the spirit of the season and avoid the whole thing. When it comes to choosing gifts, we are reminded that we need to be the right gift to others and the best gift we can give is our best selves to others.

Advent is all about waiting. While we wait in lines at the mall and at the post office, remember those homeless lost souls who wait in lines for meals at places like our Cathedral on the Boston Common. They have little or nothing for which to celebrate this season. Remember the elderly and disabled who wait for pension and social security checks in hopes that they can pay the heating bill, out food on the table and pay for prescriptions. Remember those who wait anxiously for a diagnosis of a serious disease or disorder. And let us not forget those in our armed forces, firefighters and police and others in dangerous occupations and those who wait for their return. Our lives are often shaped by that for which we wait.

Prepare for this coming season by reordering whatever is necessary in your interior life. Devise a discipline for your own private quiet time with God, whether in the morning, at midday or in the evening. We need time alone in prayer to clear the way for Christ to come into our daily lives. We need time to reflect on what we need to change and what to we need to keep. Whether you practice yoga, meditation, centering prayer, or just silence, take time to center on the Christ within. Contemplate the sacred in all people and in all places and things.

Make straight the way of the Lord by being ready to receive Christ when he makes his entrance onto your life stage, especially at times and places you might least expect.

And don't miss your cue.