

Sermon for December 10, 2017 – “Can I Get a Witness?”

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B – Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:1-12, 19-23

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A Sunday school asked her class: “If I sold all my belongings and gave all my money to the church would that get me into heaven?” “No!” the children all answered. “If I helped out at the church and got involved in church events would that get me into heaven?” Again, the answer was, “No!” “Well, then, if I was kind to people and helped them would that get me into Heaven?” she asked them again. Again, they all answered, “No!” “Well,” she continued, “then how can I get into Heaven?” A boy in the back shouted out, “You gotta be dead!”

Our Advent readings this morning lead us to think about things like, salvation and mission; at least I hope they do. And we may as well admit it, our thinking about salvation boils down to three things:

- First – what we’re being saved from, which most people will tell you is hell.
- Second – what are we being saved to, which we assume to be heaven.
- And third – how to go about getting saved.

Think about it. Salvation in the hearts and minds of most people is about avoiding hell and getting into heaven when we die. That last part, the part about dying, is key. I mean, don’t we tend to think of heaven and hell as places we go when we die? That salvation is something waiting for us at the end? And, by extension, isn’t the “mission of the Church” simply about helping people avoid hell? Isn’t it about getting ourselves and as many of our family and friends into heaven as possible? For those that do, allow me to introduce Isaiah and John. Both were prophets at key times in the history of Israel; Isaiah during the Exile and John during Roman occupation. Both have something to say about salvation and about the mission of the people of God. They both seem to be saying is that salvation is **not** about another place or time. They both seem to believe that salvation is the reality of this world as it **should** be. And the mission of God’s people, in our case the Church, should be to help make that reality happen. Isaiah tells us that we’re to turn our attention to those named as recipients of God’s Good News: the poor, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, the mournful, and the faint of spirit, the least of these that we talked about a few weeks back. The Church is defined as a group of God’s people who exist for the sake of others, people participating in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity. We’re to proclaim to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. We’re to be a community of faith, hope and love, a community of witnesses entrusting itself to God alone even at the risk of losing its life.

Okay, fine... But how do we know when we’re on the right track? Well, one way is when those around us, “**the nations of the world**” as Isaiah puts it, notice that we’re living **differently**. More to the point, when they notice that we’re living for God and others...**all** others. Earlier, Isaiah wrote this..“**I will give you as a light to the nations...“That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”** Which brings us to the notion of light, “the Light” from before time and forever. We encounter this Light in our gospel reading this morning. We also encounter John whom the evangelist does not refer to as the “the Baptist.” John is simply “**a man sent from God – as a witness to testify to the Light.**” The Light is, of course, Jesus. He’s referred to, in the original Greek, as the “Logos” which is usually translated as the “Word.” This “Word” was, and is, God and has been since before creation. In our gospel reading, we learn that through Him “**All things were made through him...“And without him was not anything made that was made.”** We learn too that He “**became flesh and dwelt among us.**” He grew and dwelt among us. He would one day read, in his hometown synagogue, a portion of the very same passage from Isaiah we read earlier. When he finished, He didn’t say “this is the Word of the Lord.” No, He simply declared, “**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**”

That is, **now** is the time to begin living out the vision of salvation and mission Isaiah proclaimed and that God intends. It's time for salvation and mission as the reality of this world. It's time for the Church to become as it **should** be! It's this vision of salvation and mission John was sent to witness.

John is a witness. The word in Greek is **martyria** from which we get the word "martyr." We usually think of a witness in a legal setting, like a courtroom, someone called to say what they've seen or heard or someone attesting to the truth/falsehood of another's testimony. John was called to attest to the truth, the truth that the true Light has come into the world. A light that the darkness has not overcome, that the darkness cannot and will not overcome. John was called to bring attention to this Light so that others might recognize it and believe. Belief in this sense indeed means to recognize. It means to trust. It means to commit ourselves to the Light, the Light which is a fulfillment of Isaiah's vision, the Light which is, of course, Jesus Christ. The Light that is the way, the truth and the life for all people!

So, what this all means is that we, as the people of God, as the Body of Christ, as the church, are to commit ourselves to the kind of salvation and mission that Isaiah proclaims, that John recognizes, and that Jesus came to embody. It is the Light that both John **and** Jesus call us to **follow** so that we, by the way in which we live our lives, might become "**a light to the nations...**", an example to the rest of the world desperate for a better way! John wasn't the light, but he came to testify to the light. John didn't come to deck the halls. He didn't come to stir us into a frenzy of shopping and spending. He didn't even come to remind us that there are only 14 days until Christmas, but if you order now you can still have it in time for the holidays. No, he came to remind us. He came to bear witness to all who will listen, to all those willing to hear the truth, that the darkest forces of the world aren't nearly as powerful as they claim or even **appear** to be.

Our prayer during Advent is this, that God would stir up His power and "**and with great might come among us.**" Brothers and sisters, here's the thing. We are people who claim to have received Him and believed in His name. To us He gave power to become children of God. This Advent will we finally claim our birthright? Will we allow God to stir things up within us, within our church? Will we prepare room in our hearts for our King to be born anew? Will we become more like John, "a man sent from God?" I truly hope so because that is, in fact, who we **really** are! We are people sent from God! We are people sent from God as witnesses. We are people sent to testify to the Light so that all might believe through Him. We are people sent to reflect the light of Christ to a world that seems to be descending further and further into darkness. We are a people that the Lord has anointed. We are a people sent us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and we are to do so whenever and wherever we find ourselves.

Jesus Christ is the Light and in the Light, is "**life, and the life was the light of all people.**" As Christians, people look to **us** to see the Light. When our mission, all that we say and do, bears witness to the Light then heaven and salvation will be understood not as a time and place after death but rather the world as it **should** be, here and now, and the peace on earth we seek won't seem so elusive!

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.