

3rd Sunday of Advent - John 1:6-8, 19-28

A bumper sticker on the back of a car made me take a second look. Here is what it read:

THERE IS A GOD . . . AND IT IS NOT YOU

I suppose it could be said that few really great truths can be reduced to the space of bumper sticker, but that may be one of them.

Our text this morning is not a bumper sticker, but the same twin insights from this bumper sticker are found in our Gospel reading today from Saint John, which does form the scriptural base for this Third Sunday of Advent. Let's take a second look at the Gospel reading.

The preacher is John the Baptist. His church is the rugged outdoors of the Judean wilderness. His dress and diet are certainly odd, to say it kindly. And his message is full of fire and fury.

Would he ever survive in today's modern Church, where convenient parking and comfortable temperature-controlled sanctuaries are essential, and where we expect our priests and ministers to be polished and polite?

Makes you wonder, doesn't it? But despite the difficulty of getting to John, and despite how his message tended to rub his hearers the wrong way, John's Gospel tells us that **great** crowds made their way out to hear him anyway. Why did they come to such a harsh setting to hear such a harsh message from such a harsh-looking preacher? What was the attraction?

It must have been the message itself, even if it was wrapped in a rough package. Like a fine Christmas gift wrapped in coarse burlap, John's harsh external packaging did not cancel the precious treasure of his message.

And what was John's message? He announced to the people that God was still engaged in His world, that God was coming soon, breaking into their moment of history, and that He expected them to prepare for His coming by repenting of their sins, humbling themselves, and then opening their eyes to recognize God when he came.

It was a radical message, actually. For one thing, there had been no prophet like John since the close of the Old Testament, centuries earlier. It had been a long time in Israel since anyone had spoken with such conviction and such courage.

John's words seemed to cut to the heart of the matter, and in so doing, his words cut to the hearts of the listeners too. John did not back down from anyone. He seemed unconcerned about popularity polls or even his own safety.

He dared to call everyone to repentance, even the Jews, brushing aside their long-standing sense of religious superiority to the rest of the world.

He called Roman soldiers to practice justice. He publicly denounced corruption and sin in the private life of the King.

And what was the fire in his bones, the wind behind the sail of John's message? It was the solid conviction that God was still among them. God had not abandoned His people, nor taken a long vacation from the world, just because the Romans had occupied their land, or because it had been so long since a prophet had spoken with such clear conviction for God.

It had seemed like a long silence from the heavens, as it often seems to us when life seems dominated by the powers of this world instead of by God. But John's message broke the silence.

John not only announced that God still existed, and that God still cared, but he also announced that God was already so close that Christ, the Messiah of God, was already in their very midst. He was "one among you," John said.

Imagine how that must have made the crowd look around! And here is the profound and startling truth this Sunday too. God is still among us, closer than our next heart-beat, more current than tomorrow's paper.

We just have to learn to look with insight instead of eyesight. We have to learn to listen with our souls, not just our ears. We have to slow down, quiet down, enough to hear the call to repent, to prepare, to expect, to believe that God is still here.

No matter how much the evidence seems to scream the contrary, God is still here, and He still cares—for each and every least, last, and lost one of us.

Perhaps the first blindness that keeps us from recognizing God when He comes is our persistent tendency to act like we were god, that we were in control of our little universe, that our security, our possessions, our decisions, and our destiny were all in our own hands.

But actually the universe is in God's hands, not ours. And no matter how nice our corner office, or how exalted our titles at work, no matter how much of God's abundance we have accumulated, or how many people read our blogs or Face Book entries—we are not God. Not even close. The position is already filled, thank you.

And this is another of the characteristics that made John the Baptist so refreshing, so engaging, to his hearers, and so very usable to God. He was genuinely humble.

For all his popularity, for all his powerful rhetoric, and despite the enormous success of his ministry, John's ego was in check. He did not let his popularity go to his head, even though he eventually lost his head to a violent martyr's death at the hands of King Herod.

In our Gospel text today, notice how easy it would have been for John to accept the mantle of "Christ" from the crowd around him. They were clamoring to shortcut their expectation for the Messiah by pinning the job on John himself.

But his job was to point the people to Christ, not claim the title for himself. He knew that the Christ was coming, that he was already among them, but John also knew just as surely that it was not him.

How many times have we seen the egos of popular people run wild to a disastrous ruin—whether preachers or politicians or movie stars—when the adoring crowd heaps applause and praise? Too many times to count. But we cannot count John the Baptist in that sad march of fools.

God is among us. But look for Him where you might least expect to find Him. And if the past actions of God are any indication of His presence, we might look especially close when we are among the poor and powerless, among the outcast and humble, or among children, in the presence of sudden beauty, or surprising innocence. But one place we need not look—the mirror. There is a God, and it is not us. AMEN.