

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Advent 3B, 12/13/2020, Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Who are you, the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John the Baptist. Who are you?

Answering that question can help people with their purchases. I remember all of the times that Gary and I moved and he would make us spend time thinking about who we were as we looked at housing. Who were we, *really*? When we moved to Virginia Beach in 2007, I fell in love with one unit in a duplex that was close to the beach. The main thing about it was that it was close to the beach. It was also in an area that flooded regularly, and none of our furniture would have fit in it. The house was mostly about bedrooms and a one-car garage (we had two cars, by the way), with a small living area that had a kitchen counter where we could have eaten using stools that we did not own. Any other table as well as couches and bookshelves and a television set would have had to have been crammed into the space right by this counter. The fence around the tiny backyard I'd claimed we needed for our dog was broken, but I told Gary no problem: I would walk the dog. He reminded me that he was going to be living in DC five days a week and asked me how excited I would be to walk the dog in the dark in that neighborhood. Finally he said, Face it, honey. We are not funky beach people. And we bought a condo close to the church that fit our furniture.

Answering the question "who are you" can help businesses and non-profits and churches understand our mission, our niche. If our church disappeared, who in the neighborhood would notice besides members? When I first came here, I would have said that if our church disappeared the preschool families would notice. But we don't have a preschool anymore. Who are we?

Who are we *really*? Various vestries have puzzled over this question here at St. David's for the past ten years. We had to close the preschool due to changing neighborhood needs but we are still a church that values children. We value music, but different styles, so try to find ways to balance that. We are a church that values prayer, and built a labyrinth, and we put that labyrinth next to playground equipment because we value children. One of my favorite things on a weekday is to go pray the labyrinth and find a tricycle or children's car lingering on the labyrinth, evidence that kids, some from our church and others from the neighborhood, are growing up knowing a labyrinth. In the vestries, we have come to answer "who are we really?" with "we're the corner church. Local. Loving. We're the church on the corner."

What about John? Who are you, they ask him. And he tells them what he is not. Kind of like how I am not a funky beach person. Kind of like how St. David's is not a soaring cathedral with a pipe organ and marble altar. John is not the Messiah. John is not Elijah.

John is the one who says make straight the way of the Lord. John is the one who baptizes with water. John says that he is not worthy to untie the sandal of the one for whom he is preparing.

Last Sunday I preached about reasons that I love John the Baptist, and this week, the third Sunday of Advent, Rose Sunday, we are still talking about JBap. We even lit the pink candle in our Advent wreath today in his honor. People sometimes think the pink candle is for Mary, perhaps because pink is often affiliated with the female gender.

This is one of two Sundays per year when we use these rose-colored vestments, which many call pink, and back on Rose Sunday in Lent last March year, when I was in the midst of breast cancer treatment, my sister told me that watching me on the livestream in these vestments made her think of a walking talking breast cancer ribbon. That made me laugh, which is great, because Rose Sunday is supposed to be a Sunday of joy. A joyful break in the midst of a penitential season.

Rejoice, we heard in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Rejoice, yet we are still with John the Baptist who doesn't seem joyful. But he does seem like someone filled with longing.

Longing is a core theme of Advent. John the Baptist's people—Jesus' people—were living under oppressive Roman rule. They longed for more autonomy. They longed to be important, not a backwater occupied country.

John was deeply religious and longed for justice. John longed for others to take their relationship with God as seriously as he did.

Last week I talked about hope, and longing and hope are related, but they seem to have a slightly different flavor. I want us to savor and ruminate on that today.

When we hope for something, it feels to me like we are turning all of our attention ahead. With longing, we want something, but it seems to be also filling a need that maybe is related to something in our background.

For example, John's people longed for a savior as they were living as an occupied country. Perhaps they remembered the exile, and the joy of getting to return to their Promised Land from Babylon. We can hear a little about what they must have been like in Psalm 126 today: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream."

Maybe those exiles, when they longed to return to their Promised Land, remembered when it had been promised to their ancestors. How Moses and his generation had wandered in the wilderness for forty years, making their way there.

In 2020, here at this church on the corner, we might long for a Christmas eve more like last year. We had, as usual, a pageant at the 6 PM service. What I remember most about that service last year were the five kids who were waiting outside my office and greeted me like a rock star when

I came back out after collecting my things to run home for an hour or so before returning for the late service. “Will you take a photo with us?” they asked.

I long for those kids, for that church, this Advent.

I recognize that the root of all my longing is, somehow, God. A God who knit me together in my mother’s womb. A God who came and took on flesh, to know what it was like to be a creature instead of just a creator. I long for God to save us.

We Episcopalians are blessed to have an Advent season of longing where we can reflect on God while so much of the rest of the world leaps to the frenzy of Christmas. But this year, all of that frenzy is more subdued. We aren’t going to the Nutcracker in person. We aren’t packing the malls or airports. We aren’t going to eat our dinner a little too quickly so that we can get to church on time. Our longing this year is a little different.

But Christ is coming. The baby is a little closer to the manger. And while we don’t know when Christ will come again, he is closer to coming again than he was last year.

Let yourself long for him this Advent.