

Darkness There No More Resides

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT [b]

December 17, 2017

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. ... ¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

John the prophet came to bear witness to the light.

In the verse previous, in writing his account of the Gospel, the Apostle John describes the entrance of God the Son into the world this way:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

[John 1:5]

Now, in verse 6, we are given John the prophet sent out to bear witness to the light, and we quickly ask, *What is this darkness?*

So Jesus is the light, he shines in the darkness—what is the darkness?

1. 19: the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to

ask [John], “Who are you?”

This is the party of the Jews—it’s a political or theological group. It’s those who want to keep everyone under the Law. They have control of the Law at the Temple in Jerusalem and in the synagogues throughout Judea, and they want no one doing anything outside the control of the Law. And a prophet out in the wilderness preaching the forgiveness of sins and proclaiming the coming of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, well, this is not something they had in their plans, it is chaos, and they need to get it locked down under the Law.

Now we can see what the darkness is. The placing of the sinner under the Law so that the sinner must justify himself, and so that the sinner is blinded to the grace and mercy of God—this is darkness.

And when John told them that he, John, was not the Christ, then they bring their second wave of darkness, v. 21:

²¹ [Then] they asked [John], “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

They will keep the pressure on until they pin John down. They don’t like what he’s preaching: this proclamation of a Savior releasing people from the guilt of the Law, it’s letting sinners live in the freedom of the Gospel; they can’t let that happen, they must pin John down and make him accountable—this is their darkness.

Then we see what causes all this to happen, v. 24:

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

“Sent from the Pharisees”—this explains it. The Pharisees are the ones spending their days making sure everyone washes their hands properly, and eats only the approved food, and stays away from people who aren’t clean, and scorns the sinners, and pays their tithing, and these Pharisees even count how

many steps people walk on a Sabbath, just to make sure no one does any work on that day.

The Pharisees know how to keep you under the Law, and when they see a sinner rejoicing in the mercy of God and his gifts, they must find a way to quash the joy.

So they sent a team out to check on this John. He's out there baptizing sinners in the Jordan, telling them how God provides the Lamb who takes away their sin.

He's bringing good news to those impoverished by guilt; he's binding up those with hearts broken by shame; he proclaiming liberty to those captured by fear; he's freeing those imprisoned by a bad conscience; he's comforting those who mourn; and John the Baptist is then sending these cleansed sinners back to their homes in Jerusalem and surrounding cities with a song of hope and gladness on their lips, instead of their conversation of fear and ashes.

John came to bear witness to the light. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

The light is Jesus, God the Son, baptized in the Jordan by John to take away the sin of the world.

This season of Advent, on the Sunday mornings and at the Wednesday evening services, we have been singing the hymn, *Savior of the Nations, Come*. This is one of the great hymns of the early Church. It was written over 1,600 years ago by St. Ambrose, so that when we sing it, we are joining our voices with the voices of Christian families from the last 16 centuries. In verse 7, Ambrose gives us the words,

From the manger new born light

Shines in glory through the night.

Darkness there no more resides

In this light faith now abides.

Darkness no more resides. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The darkness is death. The darkness is sin which brings death. The darkness is the power of the Law which convicts of sin and covers in shame. The darkness is our fear of death, our turning to the Law to find our own justification; it is the devil and his accusations. The darkness is any conversation turning us from rejoicing with one another in the freedom of the Gospel, from comforting and encouraging one another in the gifts of our Lord, and turns us instead to judge one another not by the clothing of Christ which we all bear in Baptism, but by the measurements of the Law.

The darkness no more resides. The light has shined, and the darkness cannot remain.

The Light, as John bears witness, is Jesus, the Christ anointed to take away the sin of the world.

The Law still remains. We need it. Our sinful flesh still needs to be stung by it, so that we daily despair of our own worthiness, and we turn to find worthiness elsewhere.

The elsewhere is the Light. It is The One of Whom John the Baptist was sent to bear witness. John was baptizing sinners into the Christ's forgiveness, clothing them in his righteousness.

John's baptism is over. He did his job. He served out the gifts the Lord sent him to serve out. He's a wine skin who poured out good wine, but when the wine was gone, we are given new wineskins.

So John the Baptist baptized as he was given to do, and sinners walked out of that water cleansed of sin and justified before God.

But John's baptism is not given to us. Jesus, knowing that King Herod later murdered John, went on his ministry toward the cross, and having given the sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world, and having been resurrected from the dead, then, before ascending to the Father, he gave the Baptism that is for us.

It is the Baptism into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is the Baptism which, as Peter says in his Pentecost sermon, is to go to us and our families, to our children, old and infant, to all

who are far off. It is the Baptism given to cleanse us of all sin, so that in our Lord's baptismal promise, we are given daily to put to death the old Adam, that is, our sinful flesh, drowning it in contrition and repentance, so that daily, in the promise of Baptism, the new man of faith stands up to live before God justified, hearing his word of forgiveness and having all confidence that his promise of grace is true and certain.

This is the Light—that Jesus has clothed us in his righteousness, that he has baptized us into his Name, that he has called us into his body, the Church, that he daily forgives our sins and keeps us as his servants.

This is the Light: Jesus who forgives the sinner. The heart of faith looks only to the righteousness of Jesus, only to the light of his forgiveness, and as St. Ambrose put it, darkness no more there resides.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.