

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 1:19-28

"A Voice"

We are indeed filled with expectation. I am excited because this will be my first Christmas Eve, and I hope the first of many here at St. Andrew's. It is exciting to see Douglas decked out in colors and lights and decorations. It truly is a special time!

Speaking of "special times," have you ever been called on the carpet by anyone? You know what I mean, feeling like you have been called down to the principal's office? Have you ever been called in front of someone, someone who had authority over you to explain something that you did or said? If you have, you know that is a pretty uncomfortable feeling. And it is even more uncomfortable if the people you are standing in front of seem very angry with you and you cannot for the life of you figure out what you did.

In our Gospel lesson this morning John the Baptist was called on the carpet by the religious rulers asking him just who he thinks he is - preaching out in the wilderness, telling people to repent and then baptizing them. They wanted to know who John thought he was, and why he thought he had the right to be doing this kind of preaching. Can you picture the scene? This was in Bethany, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives, at the top of the Old Roman Road that leads down to the second lowest place on the earth - Jericho. They are comfortable that they are near the Temple.. There is John, this rugged individual, standing front of these religious rulers all decked out in their flowing robes, their leather bands around their heads and wrists and they are probably wagging their fingers at John, and screaming at him because they are angry with his kind of preaching. John is standing there, calmly and coolly telling them all he is doing is preaching about one who is coming.

Can you just hear his words in his own defense: "Don't get so upset - I am not doing something so terrible. I am not the Christ, I am not Elijah, I am not a prophet, *"I am the voice of one calling in the desert, "Make straight the way for the Lord."*" as the Prophet Isaiah said. (John 1:23) You don't have to worry about me, but the Messiah - *"He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."*" (John 1:27)

John gave a witness to "the One who was coming." He bore witness to Jesus. He stood his ground, he explained what he saw as his mission, he told about the coming of Jesus' public ministry. John the Baptist was called by God to bear witness to the coming of the work that Our Savior Jesus would do. He was called by God Himself to be a voice of God in this world; he was called to prepare people for Jesus. And he knew that his calling from God was not a popular calling.

The Jews and Levites - the religious rulers were angry with him, they could not understand where he got all this authority, or the power, or who gave him the permission to do this kind of preaching. They knew it didn't come from them, or from the Temple! John didn't fit the mold or the profile the people were looking for.

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John wasn't what you might call the typical religious ruler of his day. But John was faithful to his calling; he was faithful because he knew he was called by God Himself for this mission. He knew God Himself would give him the strength to carry forth faithfully with this mission.

John did not come to show how great he was, which was the way these religious rulers acted. He came to show others about another One who was greater than he was. John came to bear witness to the light of the world. John's job was not to be the center of attention, but as the beacon of light pointing to someone else.

John the Baptist was God's miracle to two elderly parents, God's creation, but without the light of Christ, he was nothing. John's purpose was to let the light of Christ shine through him and help him point the way to Jesus, the Messiah.

In our lives, we are called by God to bear witness to Jesus Christ and His saving grace in our lives. It might be by our example or maybe it is by a gentle touch to someone who is feeling loss or the brokenness of this world, especially during this Christmas time. This is a very hard time for some people. They watch the world celebrating and they have a hole in their hearts. You may be the one to tough them and bring them hope. There are as many ways for us to bear witness to Christ as there are people in His church. No one way is perfect, no one way is right! But what is right is that you and I must find that way to bear witness as John did in the wilderness.

There is a legend about a little shepherd boy who watched in amazement when the 3 wise-men brought their precious gifts to the Lord. His eyes filled with tears as he thought, if only a pearl would fall from the hand of a king, then I could go there too. But I am ashamed to go; I have no gift for the Savior. The little lad was about to turn and run for the hills when suddenly an angel appeared before him and said, "Give a gift that is closest to your heart." So he did. They say that the Bethlehem star gave an extra twinkle in the heavens as a ragged boy placed a faded blue sack beside the expensive gifts of the three wise kings of the Orient. The sack contained the things closest to his heart, a sea shell that whispered in his ears, a piece of rope used to climb trees, a jagged slingshot made from a forked limb and a butterfly preserved in candle-wax.

That little boy gave to Jesus a part of himself. He gave to him those things that he was truly attached to. He gave to Jesus not merely things - but he gave a part of himself. As we think about what we want to give to Jesus; we can see what He wants this Christmas as a gift, it is us, ourselves. God wants us to give to Him the gift of our lives - and when we do that then He will give us the power, the strength, and the courage to be His reflection in this world. He will give us the power to witness about His grace, His love, His mercy, His gift of salvation and His love to the world.

God wants us to be people of hope. He wants us to be people who see beyond the evening news which highlights the brokenness of this world and take it upon ourselves to bring the good

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news of His promise of Grace that comes with His only Son, Jesus Christ stepped into time – into the world - in the form of a baby - dependent upon His mother – but who would grow to bring us the promise, His promise of spending eternity with Him.

I read that in late 18th century Poland, the Kaiser's forces were burning all the Jewish villages. One village had been burned and nothing was left standing. As the sun came up the next morning an old Jewish gentlemen pounded a few boards together, made a simple stand and opened it up for business. A young man walked by, stared in disbelief and asked, "What are you selling among these ruins. The man smiled and said, "I am selling hope. You can sell water on a dry desert, so the place to sell hope is on the ash heap of destruction."

As John the Baptist gave himself to God and the mission he was called to do, God is asking us to give ourselves to Him so that He might use us for the mission He created us to do. We are all called to bear witness to the One who is coming as a babe in the manger. We are all called so that we might be "*a voice crying in the wilderness of this world,*" a voice crying so that people might not see us, but would see the Christ Child, the babe, the precious gift of life that God has given to all mankind.

God is calling us to bring hope in the place of despair, to bring comfort to those who are hurting, to bring hope to those who are grieving, to bring a measure of his grace into this world and especially to bring His light where there is darkness in this world. We need to ask Him to show us the opportunities where we can be His hands and His feet to the world.

In closing I would like to share with you a story based on a poem by Edwin Markham called "How the Great Guest Came."

An old cobbler named Conrad had a dream that the Lord was coming to visit him. So he washed the walls of his small shop and his shelves until they shined. He decorated his shop with holly and fir. He put milk and honey on his table to offer to his special guest. He sat down and waited.

As he was waiting, he saw a poor barefoot beggar walking in the rain outside his door. He felt sorry for the man and invited him in and gave him a pair of shoes. His clean floor was now dirty from the rain and mud.

As he was about to clean it up, he noticed an old lady who was bent over carrying a heavy load of firewood. He invited her in to sit and rest, shared some of his food with her and walked with her, helping carry some of the firewood.

When he returned to his shop, he thought of all that needed to be done. He began to clean again and hoped he had time to find more food. Just then there was a knock at the door. He answered hurriedly and it was a small child crying, lost and cold. He picked up the child, dried her tears, gave her something to drink, the cup of milk and walked her to her home down the street and around the corner.

He hurried back to the shop. He was too tired now to clean or find more food - but he still waited. Evening came and he began to wonder if the Lord had forgotten. Then he heard a soft voice break the silence in that shop, 'Lift up your heart, for I kept my word. Three times I came

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to your friendly door, and three times my shadow was on your floor. I was the beggar with bruised feet; I was the woman you gave to eat, I was the lost child on that homeless street." Conrad smiled to himself, put his feet up on the table and settled back in his chair - to pray and talk with the Savior so fair. "