

Sermon, Third Sunday in Advent, 12/17/2023, St. David's Episcopal, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28, *Elizabeth Felicetti*

Advent feels like it's flying by. We're already at that coveted pink candle, which represents John the Baptist, and we have the rose hangings and vestments. We also break out the rose on one Sunday in Lent, the idea being in both seasons that we need some joy in the midst of penitence and repentance. You'll notice a lot of joy in the first three readings this morning: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;" "Then was our mouth filled with laughter"; "Rejoice always."

Then we come to the Gospel, where the Gospel of John talks about John the Baptist for the second Sunday in a row. Last week we heard about John's ascetic practices. Today, his authority is questioned. But before we dig into that, I need to say a word about how the Gospel of John uses the word "the Jews." We heard that "the Jews" sent priests and Levites to John the Baptist. This Gospel writer uses the term "the Jews" to refer to Jewish people who struggled with Jesus' ministry and did not believe he was the Messiah, but sometimes this sounds as if it refers to *all* Jewish people. Never forget that Jesus was Jewish, as was John the Baptist and John the Baptist's parents. Unfortunately, the Gospel of John is sometimes interpreted in antisemitic ways, which would horrify the writer as well as those he writes about, including John the Baptist and Jesus, who were faithful Jews themselves.

The author of John's Gospel, presumably named John, never refers to John the Baptist as "the Baptist" or "Baptizer." In fact, this is the only gospel that does not tell us specifically that John baptized Jesus. John the Baptist was a big deal in his day, and the writer of this gospel takes great pains to show that John was not more important than Jesus, carefully stating that John was not the light himself, but came to testify to it. He writes about John the Baptist not being the Messiah right in the first chapter of this gospel. After John denies not only being the Messiah but also says he isn't Elijah or a prophet, these religious authorities ask him, "Why then are you baptizing?"

In other words, who do you think you are to do this religious thing? *We* are the important religious people. *We* are the ones who get to do important religious things.

That line about authority resonated with me as I ruminated over these readings. John was a deeply religious man who ministered in the wilderness before being arrested and executed because of his outspoken beliefs. But John was not a priest like his father Zechariah. John lived outside of the conventional authorities of his religion and became interpreted as a threat to those in charge. They didn't like his power or popularity. He operated outside of their control.

Sitting in this room today (or somewhere else, for those watching from the livestream), who do you think *you* are? Do you feel like you have authority to do important religious things, or are

those things only for people like me who put on pink vestments and preach at you on Sundays? Am I the professional Christian and you all are supposed to be sheep who do what I tell you?

John the Baptist can help us all claim our own authority, as we pray this morning's collect of the day: "Stir up your power, o Lord, and with great might come among us." God can and does work among and through all of us, whether or not we are ordained.

Last Wednesday, Marti and I went to a local hospice house and visited with a great minister of God who died that night. Debbie Hazzard was one of the first people I met here at St. David's. She was on the vestry when I was called as rector, so was in the group of people who interviewed me thirteen years ago after the search committee recommended me as the next rector. She was a realtor then, and sold Gary and me the house we still live in. The real estate market underwent some troubling times, so Debbie, in her fifties, enrolled in nursing school and became a hospice nurse. She was a Daughter of the King, vestry member, register, lector, and lay eucharistic minister.

Twenty years ago, after her husband Alan died following Hurricane Isabel, Debbie preached at his funeral because she was an empowered minister and knew that no one could do it as well as she could. All these years later, people remember and talk about that sermon and the service that took place in candlelight because the power was off for a long time following the powerful storm.

And I learned this morning that at Debbie's service on Wednesday, her son Chris will speak. I am sure he was inspired watching his mother speak about her beloved all those years ago.

Debbie claimed her authority as a Christian. She did not wait for a board of people to tell her what she could or could not do. We have lost someone I not only loved but admired, and I hope that whether or not you knew Debbie, you can channel her alongside John the Baptist and claim authority as a Christian this Advent.

I'm grateful to be an Episcopal Christian. I like the way we read the Bible and the way we emphasize worship over required belief. But we as a church do suffer from clericalism, from the idea that bishops and priests can do things that others can't do. This has sometimes been misinterpreted as some people being more important than others.

A year ago, I had learned that my cancer was back and knew that whatever the treatment, I would need to take some time away from St. David's. The wardens and I realized that while this was hard on the church, it was also an opportunity for everyone to embrace their ministry. I was dazzled when I came back September by all the amazing things that happened in my absence: rooms renovated, people baptized, new members. I'm more grateful than I can ever express to be

back, and grateful to have partners in ministry instead of being the professional Christian bossing around a bunch of sheep.

Last week I mentioned to you a podcast called Small Churches Big Impact. This week's episode included interviews of three Episcopal laity who are in lay-led churches that are thriving. One of these churches is three hours away from any metropolitan area so is only able to get supply priests to come a few times a year to celebrate Eucharist, so they primarily worship using morning prayer. Despite this, they are experiencing growth, including among children.

Churches are not about clergy, but about Jesus. We as a church together point toward Jesus, like John the Baptist, who was a witness to testify to the light. He himself was not the light but came to testify to the light.

With Christmas a week away, we can become caught up in the busyness of the season, with checking off gifts and decorating and planning and preparing food. Our church season of Advent can help us resist this, instead preparing our hearts for Jesus.

How are you seeking the light this Advent, and how can you testify it so that others can find the light as well?