

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Isaiah 65:17–25; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–28; John 1:6–9, 19–28

Since the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book, the gospel lessons on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent are always about John the Baptist. In this Lectionary Year of Mark, by far the shortest of our gospels, the editors had the opportunity to appoint a lesson from John. Today's gospel follows the introduction, the prologue, of John's Gospel: This is Francis Moloney's translation of this gospel's first verse. He tries to capture something of the dynamic of the Greek verbs: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was turned toward God, and what God was, the Word was also."¹

In the middle of the prologue are these words about the Baptist and God's purpose in sending his Son: "A man appeared who was sent from God. He came as a witness that he might witness all about the light for the purpose that all might believe through him. He was not the light but in order to witness all about the light."² God's purpose was for all to believe. The lectionary editors use these words from the prologue to introduce the story of Jesus' ministry that follows the prologue. What we heard is a narrative of the first of four days of Jesus' ministry. On the fourth of these days, Jesus will be at a wedding in Cana with his mother and his brothers and sisters. By then Jesus will have four disciples, Andrew, Simon, Philip, and Nathana-el. They are called by Jesus to follow him. Only John and Jesus are said to be sent from God.

I've mentioned many times in this pulpit the Scripture blog of the Reverend Dr. Mark Davis, senior pastor of St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California. I'm been following him for many years. Some years ago, he began translating *Ioudaios*, not as "Jews" but as "Judeans." It's an equally valid translation. For me, it doesn't hide what I know about the

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 33.

² John 1:6–9. My translation using Mark Davis, "[Witness Under Fire](#)," (accessed 13 December 2020) and [Bible Hub](#), (accessed 13 December 2020)>

anti-Semitism that's abroad in the world. But it helps me to hope that we are on a journey to a new relationship among people of faith.

Priests and Levites are sent to ask John, "Who are you?"³ "I am not the Christ"⁴—"I am a voice crying out,"—shouting—"in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."⁵ The really important words of John are what he says about the Christ: "Among you stands one whom you know not."⁶

I wrote in the *Angelus* for this week that I had come across words in the service for the consecration of this church that weren't included in the present Prayer Book. I was moved by the words that declare that you and I "dwell in the midst of the assembly of the saints upon earth."⁷

In the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament, *ekklesia*, is translated 109 times as "church," four times as "assembly," and twice as "congregation." "Church" is, for those of us who are here today, probably a comfortable word, but not for many who are not among us here or elsewhere. In the New Testament the word "saint" refers to those who believe in Jesus Christ and follow him worship, pray, and give in community with other believers.

I've mentioned before how much I miss congregational singing. The psalms, historic canticles, English-language hymnody, English adaptation of Latin plainsong, and the vast range of what is available to us is a great spiritual heritage. The physical act of singing can help to reset whatever is going on emotionally in our bodies. A great hymn can break through great grief with faith.

I'm keenly aware that we have not held funerals for Father Edgar Wells and Michael Merenda. Their ashes rest in Vault in the Lady Chapel. I was

³ John 1:19.

⁴ John 1:20.

⁵ John 1:

⁶ John 1:26.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1892), 537.

delighted that I was able to set Mike's ashes on Father Wells'—they were prepared by the same funeral home. We don't want to bury them without music.

I'm keenly aware that we have not baptized anyone this year. There have been no weddings here this year. But we have done our best as a congregation to keep our church home open daily and to gather daily for the Eucharist.

I ask you to join me in thinking about ourselves as an assembly of believers, believers in Almighty God and in the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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