

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
Third Sunday of Advent
John 1:6-8, 19-28; John the Witness
December 17, 2023

A few years back I went through a season where I went in a lot of caves. It seemed like everywhere we vacationed had a cave tour option, and I signed up the family to go. If you asked my kids, they would assure you that every cave was the same, but they were not. There were differences in the ways the rocks formed, their age, the narrowness of the walkways. On every tour though, the guide offered the same group experience. The guide turned off all the lights and we were plunged into darkness. You couldn't see any rocks, any of the people on the tour. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. You couldn't see the outlines of anything. It was pure darkness. Then, they would say the part I found the most theologically insightful; your eyes will never adjust. No matter if you stay down here for five hours, five days, five years, you will never be able to see anything. There is no light to help your eyes adjust and without light they never will.

In the gospel of John we are introduced again to John the Baptist who appeared on the scene last week – a man in the wilderness proclaiming the need for repentance in the gospel of Mark. The gospel of John introduces him a little differently – he is a witness, a testifier to the light that is coming into the world to enlighten all people. The power of this light imagery is lost in our artificial light-enriched world. Even on these dark winter nights, a streetlight, the glow from the clock or our cell phones, provides enough light for our eyes to adjust, to see well enough to get to the bathroom, to find the light switch, to avoid stepping on the obstacle on the floor. The

original audience, while not plunged into cave-level darkness, would have been far more familiar the kind of darkness that has trouble seeing anything through. The kind of darkness in need of more light just to get one's bearings, just to make it from point A to point B. The kind of darkness that is difficult to do anything with.

To them, John comes saying, 'You cannot see now in this darkness, but you will see soon with the light.'

John witnesses to this coming light of Christ.

Now before we get confused with too many Johns, the namesake of the gospel of John is different than John the Baptist. They are not the same. Remember John the Baptist is going to die in a few chapters well before the death of Jesus, so he can't be the writer of this gospel. Interestingly, a careful reading of the gospel of John reveals that in this gospel the man we typically call John the Baptist is never called John the Baptist. While he is described as baptizing people it never actually says he baptizes Jesus. John's primary role in this gospel is not as one who baptizes but one who calls attention to the light that is coming. He is John the witness, and what he witnesses to is God coming into the world in a unique way that will change the way you see everything.

You cannot see now, but you will see.

So what does John the Witness want us to do actually?

“Make straight the way of the Lord” I’m so used to hearing this message from John, who is making his own spin off a metaphor from the prophet Isaiah, that I have never really thought about what an odd request this is. Clear the way for God, smooth out a path . . . in the words of Isaiah, “make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In modern-speak, clean the house and roll out the red carpet, Jesus is coming.

But in reading Scripture, it is apparent that God doesn’t need us to clear the brush or roll out the red carpet; God is used to coming in the mess.

God doesn’t choose the royal welcome, usually the more humble entrance is chosen.

Making a straight pathway . . . God often leads on a circuitous path – Moses can attest to that.

But God does need something when he arrives . . . people who are ready and willing to see.

People who have woken up to the possibility that the light is coming and it will change the way they see. It is what allows them to move towards the light rather than turn away to the familiar comfort of the darkness.

See you can stumble through the darkness with just a sliver of light, or you can move to where the light is brighter, to where you can see more clearly, and not stumble so much.

John the Witness is hoping his message will help people be ready to see and move toward light so that they don’t stumble so much.

You cannot see now, but you will see.

Two years ago I ventured to Utah and hiked in the amazing landscape there. Stark in a completely different way than caves, and in fact in a way that reflects light immensely. The unobstructed sunlight turns the landscape all kinds of colors. Yet even with all that light and a fairly barren landscape, you cannot see all that you need to see. You still need a witness. And that witness comes in the form of signs in the wilderness. Literal signs

In contrast to a park that is full of trees and plant growth, the parks in Utah do not have as clear paths. They try, but it's hard because there is nothing keeping you from walking all over the barren landscape. Scattered throughout the parks are these signs that say, "Watch your step, there is life here." Southeastern Utah is covered with biological soil crust – it looks like bumpy and clumpy blackened soil, but it really is covered with lichen, mosses, green algae, and cyanobacteria. Sure not pretty life or cute and fuzzy life, but life. More importantly, this biological soil crust protected the soil from wind and rain erosion which allowed desert plants to grow. Some of these biological crusts are a thousand years old. But one footstep can break the crust, kill the unseen life, and a lot of footsteps could destroy the landscape forever. The signs witness to countless visitors that unseen and unknown reality.

You cannot see now, but you will see.

Are you willing to wake up to that reality? To change where you step because what you cannot see may in fact be true? Are you willing to look closer for what you cannot see and even if you don't see it, to act with the possibility that you may one day?

Can you suspend disbelief, be more skeptical of personal impulse than skeptical of prophetic observation, to not just let yourself adjust to the minimal light in the world but turn yourself to the source of light.

This is what John is inviting people to. It is what he is inviting us to.

In Advent we stand in a liminal time where the light has already come -2000 years ago, and yet we place ourselves back before it has, so that we can be attentive anew to its arrival. We are not standing in utter darkness, but we can always stand to see more light.

Whether we are at peace or unsettled,
whether we are eagerly discerning what's next or struggling just to get by,
whether this is a meaningful season for you or a bland one,
we can always heed John's words to wake up, to be ready to see.

To be curious before God and ask, What can I NOT see now that you want me to see?

And to linger long enough in that question to see signs that point to an answer or at least to the next faithful step.

You cannot see now, but you will.