



Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday in Advent
Date: December 11, 2005
Title: I Must Decrease, so He Can Increase

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

I love St. John's Gospel. It is so different from the others, in some very powerful ways. Where the others begin with stories, Matthew and Luke beginning with the birth of Jesus and the birth of John, and Mark beginning with John and his ministry of baptism, St. John begins with a powerful poem – a poem that uses the metaphor of light to describe Jesus as God in human form. Jesus, John tells us, comes as the light that lightens the darkness of this world. I love that image. Light is a remarkably powerful force. No matter how weak the light, or how dark the darkness, whenever the two come up against one another, the light always wins. It pushes back the darkness. Even in a room this size, if it were engulfed in total darkness, I could light a small match, and it would touch every corner of the room. That is one of the reasons that the church has long used candles as a sign of God's presence. It isn't as powerful in a setting like ours, where sunlight is plentiful and during the evening hours this room is so well lit. (There are times when you can hardly tell if these candles are burning or not.) But in earlier times, and especially during evening worship, the presence of light in the worship area was very powerful, and potent sign of God's presence.

John begins with this powerful metaphor, but right in the middle of his poetic tribute to Jesus as the light of the world, he takes a three verse detour to describe John the Baptizer as "a witness to the light." That is the Baptizer's call from God. Jesus is called to be the light of the world. John is called to witness to the world about this light; to tell it who the light is, and what his light means; to direct them towards the light, that it might enlighten the darkness in their lives. That is John's primary responsibility, and the Gospels all agree that he does it remarkably well.

That is John's call, and that is our call as well. Through the waters of our baptism, each of us has been called by God to be, with John, witnesses to the light. We are called to help others see where the light of Christ is present in this life. We are called to direct their attention to the One who is for us, and who can be for them, a source of life and light and inspiration and hope and joy. What that means, is that we have been called as Christians to speak and act and live in such a way that we draw attention away from ourselves, and towards God.

Now I know that isn't a natural thing for humans to do. We could come up with a number of examples of people who live in order to draw attention towards themselves. News stories continually inform us about the foibles of professional athletes, Hollywood stars, wealthy socialites, corporate leaders, and political figures who go to amazing extremes to draw attention to themselves. From the homes they purchase to the automobiles they drive to the vacations they take to the statements they make – there are many people whose main purpose in life, it seems, is to draw attention to themselves. And the more attention they receive, the more they appear to need.

Even in the religious community, there are painful examples of when this has become evident. One only has to think of tele-evangelists who have become so affected by the attention they were receiving that they began to think they were above and beyond the law – and that kind of thinking led to their downfall. Whenever the focus shifts away from Christ, it is tempting to think that it is all about me, or all about our ministry. The temptation is there for us as well.

FIRST LESSON
ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11
PSALM
PSALM 126
OR
ST. LUKE 1:47-55
SECOND LESSON
1ST THESSALONIANS 5:16-24
GOSPEL LESSON
ST. JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28
PRAYER OF THE DAY
ALMIGHTY GOD, YOU
ONCE CALLED JOHN THE
BAPTIST TO GIVE WITNESS
TO THE COMING OF YOUR
SON AND TO PREPARE HIS
WAY. GRANT US, YOUR
PEOPLE, THE WISDOM TO SEE
YOUR PURPOSE TODAY AND
THE OPENNESS TO HEAR
YOUR WILL, THAT WE MAY
WITNESS TO CHRIST'S
COMING AND SO PREPARE
HIS WAY; THROUGH JESUS
CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO
LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU
AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE
GOD, NOW AND FOREVER.
AMEN.

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Most of you know that I am about to begin my Sabbatical leave. In fact, after today I have just three weekends left with you before it begins. I truly am looking forward to the experience. It is going to allow me to develop some of my musical abilities. It is going to allow me to learn from some other congregations what they have discovered about meaningful worship experiences. And it is going to allow me some time to rest and be renewed. I am interested to see what the month of April will bring. I'll be leading you again in worship on the last Wednesday in Lent, and during Holy Week. Everybody I've spoken with who has taken a Sabbatical say has shared the sense that it has strengthened them, and made them more effective congregational leaders.

There is a danger in that, though. The danger is that the purpose of the Sabbatical begins to be more about becoming an impressive leader, and less about re-connecting with God, and being renewed. The Sabbatical can become more a means to an end, than an act of obedience to a God who commands us to care for our selves and our souls. Ultimately, it's not all about us. It is all about God, and the life to which God calls each of us.

The same can be true for us as a congregation. As I talk with many leaders here at Saint Peter, there is the sense that we are about to turn a corner together. The spirit of this congregation is strong. Worship has been especially rich and inspiring lately. A number of new initiatives that have been birthed among us recently. Finances are stronger than they've been for some time. If all goes well, we may even be poised to finally take on staff to help with Youth & Families Ministries later on in 2006. Things are going very well here lately, and that it exciting. But it is also dangerous.

There is always the danger of becoming too focused on the pastor, or too impressed with the congregation's ministries. This week our Gospel lesson invites us down a different path. We see the example of John, the Baptizer – a powerful individual, a great preacher, a man of God who makes a significant difference in the lives of many people. Yet one thing we quickly notice about him is how insistent he is on making sure that he never becomes the center of attention. His role is not to become a well-known and adored public leader. His role is not to develop a following that will rival that of other teachers. His role is not to convince his listeners of his wisdom and power and insight.

His role is to prepare people for someone else. His role is to witness to the light. His role is to get people ready to meet the Messiah. His role is to help them see that One much greater than he is coming – and it is this One who will offer hope and strength to those who follow him. The focus of John's entire ministry is to be a witness to the light. And because of his efforts, many people see who Jesus is, and begin to follow him.

So too with us. Our focus as a community of faith must never be our pastor or our staff or our ministries. It must always be on the Christ to whom we are called to witness. This Advent, as we pay attention to John the Baptizer and his ministry of witnessing to Jesus as the light of the world, may it remind us of what our primary calling is as people of faith: that of helping others to see the One who came as a Newborn King in Bethlehem; the One who comes into our hearts today, to lead us in faith; the One who promises to come again and bring all of history to its proper end. May our lives and our community be a witness to the One who has called us here. And through our witness, may others come to know him, and love him, and trust him.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

English Text: ⁱ

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for 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, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. ⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

⁶ Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.

¹⁹ Καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ Ἰωάννου, ὅτε ἀπέστειλαν [πρὸς αὐτὸν] οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἐξ Ἱεροσολύμων ἱερεῖς καὶ Λευίτας ἵνα ἐρωτήσωσιν αὐτὸν σὺ τίς εἶ; ²⁰ καὶ ὡμολόγησεν καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσατο, καὶ ὡμολόγησεν ὅτι ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ὁ χριστός. ²¹ καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν τί οὖν; σὺ Ἡλίας εἶ; καὶ λέγει οὐκ εἰμὶ. ὁ προφήτης εἶ σύ; καὶ ἀπεκρίθη οὐ. ²² εἶπαν οὖν αὐτῷ τίς εἶ; ἵνα ἀποκρισὶν δῶμεν τοῖς πέμψασιν ἡμᾶς τί λέγεις περὶ σεαυτοῦ; ²³ ἔφη ἐγὼ φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ εὐθύνατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, καθὼς εἶπεν Ἡσαΐας ὁ προφήτης. ²⁴ Καὶ ἀπεσταλμένοι ἦσαν ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων. ²⁵ καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ τί οὖν βαπτίζεις εἰ σὺ οὐκ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς οὐδὲ Ἡλίας οὐδὲ ὁ προφήτης; ²⁶ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰωάννης λέγων ἐγὼ βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι· μέσος ὑμῶν ἔστηκεν ὃν ὑμεῖς οὐκ οἴδατε, ²⁷ ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ [ἐγὼ] ἄξιος ἵνα λύσω αὐτοῦ τὸν ἱμάντα τοῦ ὑποδήματος. ²⁸ ταῦτα ἐν Βηθανίᾳ ἐγένετο πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, ὅπου ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Link to: http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/calendar_for_2001.html for a listing of Bible lessons for the coming weeks.

ⁱⁱ St. John 1:6-8, 19-28, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 1:6-8, 19-28, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).