

To the Light
John 1.6-8, 19-28
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Advent 3B
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How do we find our people? Where I come from, folks ask, "Where'd you go to school?" to find out who your tribe is. In Mobile, where I grew up, that question typically comes from people who only expect one of two answers, maybe three, and they're talking about high school and not university. Anything beyond the two or three expected responses, and the tribes are too far apart. We ask all kinds of questions when we first find each other. Who are your parents? What do you do? Where are you from? Who are you pulling for in the game? This is more than small talk. We ask these surface questions to fit each other into categories. Are you in my tribe? Or that other one. Are we going to become friends or remain strangers? Sometimes the questions are more ulterior, are you someone who can help me advance my interests? Or are you going to be an obstacle in my way?

The good religious folks from Jerusalem travel out to the wild place where John hangs out to assess his tribe. Will he be an ally? Will he be an obstacle. They want to know who he is, and he instead responds with poetry. They want to know what he's doing out there along the riverside, and he prophesies. He's points to prophets, testifies to light. Three times he declares he is NOT who they ask. And in knowing who he is not, John is very clear about who he is and what he is doing out there "at the edge of the inside," as Richard Rohr puts it.

John is part of the 1st century Jewish tradition, but he isn't practicing the way the folks in Jerusalem are practicing. He is rooted in tradition and he's a reformer. He has one foot planted with the ancients and another planted in what is waiting to be born. That's where his story stands in Advent—the not yet baby Christ is waiting to be born and John declares this One is coming soon, so be prepared. Get ready. Wash yourself off and head in the Christ direction. But John's posture is an invitation for everyone to join. Hold onto the ancient teaching that is capital T Truth, and let go of all that other stuff that's just dressing up and pretending. Reach into the space you can't quite see yet and follow how the light is already shining over there. It's a

poetic and prophetic invitation to exist at the edge of the inside. He's inviting people to chase after a hunch, get in on the dance, join the Divine flow.

The beloved Franciscan Richard Rohr says, "To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return. It is a prophetic position, not a rebellious or antisocial one. When you live on the edge of anything, with respect and honor (and this is crucial!), you are in a very auspicious and advantageous position. You are free from its central seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways. When you are at the center of something, you usually confuse the essentials with the non-essentials, and get tied down by trivia, loyalty tests, and job security. Not much truth can happen there.

To live on the edge of the inside is different than being an insider, a 'company man,' or a dues paying member. Yes, you have learned the rules and you understand and honor the system as far as it goes, but you do not need to protect it, defend it, or promote it. It has served its initial and helpful function. You have learned the rules well enough to know how to 'break the rules properly' which is not really to break them at all, but to find their true purpose: 'not to abolish the law but to complete it' as Jesus rightly puts it (Matthew 5:17). A doorkeeper must love both the inside and the outside of his or her group, and know how to move between these two loves."¹

This is the space John is holding out there in the wild. In being clear about who he is not, John is also very clear about who he is and what he is doing. That is to say that John has a keen sense of knowing about him. He knows in his gut what no longer serves and what is deeply essential. The fanfare and rule keeping of religious fundamentalism is not who John is. The ego and the attention of charismatic leadership is not for him, either. Drawing people to Ultimate Source, Living Water, and Holy Light? Now that's the poetic, prophetic path that gives John abundant life, and it's so much life that John is baptizing people into the same ancient-future, already-not yet Way.

He came to testify to the light. How did he testify? By gathering people together to bless them, redirect them, invite them into something fuller, guide them to reimagine most everything they thought was set in stone, and mark that whole waking up process with water. He baptized with water to mark the first step onto

¹ <https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/4-ON-THE-EDGE-OF-THE-INSIDE.pdf>

the straight path. He testified to the light by preaching like the prophets: Make straight the way of the Lord.

We know who John is when he testifies to the light by his words and his actions. His position is radically new (that's why the folks in Jerusalem send scouts to determine if he's friend or foe) and it's anciently old. Isaiah cried out first, and both John and Jesus draw our attention back to that prophet's words. They are both saying Isaiah preached good news, and it seems you have forgotten the message. Both John and Jesus want to draw folks into that stream of Ultimate Source, Living Water, and Holy Light. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...to comfort all who mourn...to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory." And how do these ancient oaks grow? Well, toward the light, of course, reaching out and up.

Artist, writer, poet Jan Richardson says "The Prayer Book of John the Baptist..."Is falling open/toward the light."² Here's the whole poem:

The Prayer Book of John the Baptist

Is written on
locusts' wings.

Is stained with
wild honey.

Is buckled by
baptismal waters.

Is mostly
pages of wilderness
where prayers are formed
not from what is present
but from what has been
worn away.

² <http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/08/advent-3-the-prayer-book-of-john-the-baptist/>

Is inscribed
with an ancient path.

Is waiting.

Is falling open
toward the light.

John's gospel begins with tremendous, rich metaphor and not dogma. We are being invited to play in something that is in between; something to be experienced and not observed or memorized. Poet Maria Howe says Biblical texts like these absolutely must be approached like poetry, observing, "we know that the story, the real story, is inarticulate. And I love that. I love the spaces in between what happens...poetry holds what can't be said. It can't be paraphrased. It can't be translated. The great poetry I love holds the mystery of being alive."³

"Who are you," they ask him. His answer is poetry—he came as a witness to testify to the light saying, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" This is John's invitation during Advent, the beginning of the church year, because John is inviting us not just to follow Jesus but to join John in his role of testifying to the light. John invites us to join him at the edge of the inside where identity becomes very clear. We are not that. We are this. On the edge, testifying to the light, we will not confuse the essentials with the non-essentials. We will hold fast to some ancient-future capital T truth that isn't just for our sakes. The Truth we are after is good news for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and the mourners. We won't be maintaining some thing just because it has always been that way and needs to always be that way. Our place is not at the center with the powerful. No, our place is at the edge with the vulnerable, and we aren't afraid of that word. We don't shy away from vulnerability because we are people who bear Holy Light for one another. To join John as light testifiers out there in the wild place is to join him as poet-prophet-preacher-reformers.

Karoline Lewis writes, "Giving witness to the light is not always comfortable, and is sometimes very painful. But, it exposes what needs to be brought out into the open, and, in the end, insists that the light will indeed shine, overcoming the darkness that has hidden so much for so long. Advent is no brief liturgical

³ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, pp. 43-45

observance. Advent can never be passive, never be just waiting, never be just anticipating or expecting. No, Advent's call, Advent's vocation, Advent's embodiment, is witness.

Advent is a way of life. So, we pay attention to these Advent texts, closely, because they remind us of how expecting the birth of Jesus calls us to live and calls us to be -- to witness to our God who moves about this world feeling everything we feel and who promises to come alongside us, especially when saying 'Behold!' is the hardest thing we've ever done."⁴

I suspect we don't want to accept an invitation to the hardest thing we've ever done. I think that's why the first words to Mary and shepherds and Joseph and all of us are, "Do not be afraid. I am with you." And the one who is being born will be called Immanuel—God with us." The invitation is to all of us together, walking away from the comfort of the center and toward the prophetic poetry of the edge where we gather with the vulnerable and remind each other: Do not be afraid. God is with us. And we are with each other. Together, we're testifying to the light. Together, we're holding to the words of the prophets. Together, we're stepping on the path of something ancient and something new.

Perhaps, then, the hardest then we've ever done is walking away from the comfortable center of what is known and certain and toward the edge of the inside and what is essential and life-giving. Like John, as we get clearer and clearer about what we are not and who we are not, then gathering at the edge will also be an act of walking toward something and not just away. We will walk together toward what gives life, what heals, what restores, what inspires, what transforms, what reframes everything. We will walk together toward the light shining in darkness that is the light of all people. And scripture tells us that the One we follow on that path is also the one who sends us out with blessing. Not a blessing to earn but a blessing that is deep within us already. The thing is, when we get clearer and clearer about what is non-essential and what is most essential, then we get clearer about who we are not and who we are. And who we are is people made in the image of God, blessed from the beginning of time to bear Holy Light in the darkness. So we testify to the light beyond and within, guiding us forward and waiting for us down the path. May you know in your bones that blessing goes with you just as you hear these words of blessing now from Jan Richardson.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5022>

Jan Richardson, "Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light"⁵

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith
in stubborn hope
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

⁵ <http://adventdoor.com/2014/12/12/advent-3-testify-to-the-light/>