

St Christopher's  
Sermon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, 11 December 2011  
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*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)*

I want to begin with two profound and closely related questions.

The first question is this:

In what do you have faith? Where do you place your faith?

The second, related question is:

On what foundation are we to ground the faith we have?

A good definition of “faith” is given by the author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, from which I took the opening prayer. In chapter 11, verse 1, faith is defined as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” That is a pretty tall order, isn’t it? “to sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

What is it that you and I are hoping for this Advent season? Is it to finish our Christmas shopping early and to get all of those pesky Christmas cards in the mail? Or is it for something deeper: is it for a true and genuine connection with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate at this time of year.

Our scripture readings today, on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, when we traditionally light the pink candle as a symbol of our Joy that Christ is drawing nearer, those readings show us how the people of ancient Israel were longing for the same connection with their Christ, their Messiah. Last Sunday, our reading from the New Testament was from the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark (vss 1-8) describing the activities of the last of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptizer. We heard the familiar verse from Isaiah (40:3), “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God.”

This same verse is repeated in the Gospel of John, which we just heard read a few minutes ago, also describing the activities of John the Baptizer..

It turns out that this double portion granted to John the Baptizer in Advent, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays, is to be found in all three years of our three-year Lectionary cycle. Furthermore, Mark, Luke and John all begin their Gospels with John the Baptizer. Clearly John was regarded by the early Church as a terribly important figure, and we do not have to search far to discover many reasons why.

To begin with, John has many Christ-like qualities. That is, he provides a shadow, or foreshadowing, of the Greater One, who, John himself, tells us in today's Gospel reading is to come after him. As we learn from Luke, John was a Levite, in the line of the High Priests, being descended on his mother's side and his father's from the first High Priest Aaron, the brother of Moses. Like Jesus, who was destined to be OUR new High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, John the Baptizer's birth was miraculous, not because he was born to a virgin but because he was born to Elizabeth, a cousin of Jesus' mother Mary, who was barren and like Sarah (Abraham's wife), well on in years, past the point of childbearing. As in the case of Jesus, it is the archangel Gabriel who announces the birth and assigns the name by which the child to be born is to be called (appearing to the father Zechariah in John's case, and to the mother Mary in the case of Jesus). Gabriel also tells John's father that his son is to be a Nazirite, which will explain why we find him dressed in the coat of camel's hair with its leather belt and subsisting on his strange bug diet.

The place of his activity, "in Bethany", as we read today in John's Gospel (vs 28), puts John the Baptizer in the trans-Jordan region, to the E of the Jordan River, opposite Jericho on the west bank. Significantly, this is the borderland to the Promised Land, the place where Moses, whose leadership is associated with the Old Covenant, was fated to die, never to set foot in the land that was to be Israel. How appropriate, then, for the guide who is to show us the way to the New Covenant and the New Kingdom—but never to enter that Kingdom himself—how appropriate for him to carry out his ministry in the region associated with the end of Moses' ministry. But that is not all. Both Moses and the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who later appear with Jesus in the Transfiguration (Mt 17:3; MK 9:4; LK 9:30), is associated with this same

trans-Jordan region. Elijah is taken up in a fiery chariot into Heaven soon after he crossed the Jordan River, after leaving Jericho behind (2 Ki 2:1-15). And according to the prophet Malachi (3:1), a quote from whom is put into John's mouth in the Gospel of Mark (1:2, "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way"), Elijah will precede the Messiah. Malachi writes:

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." (Mal 4:5)

Given this prophecy in Malachi, given the physical space in which John the Baptizer was operating, and given, lastly, his wardrobe of a camel hair coat and leather belt, which is exactly how the distinctive dress of Elijah is described in 2 Kings (1:8), it is no wonder that the priests, scribes and Pharisees asked John the Baptizer if he claimed to be Elijah. John denies that he is the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet foretold by Moses (Dt 18:15). But that leaves his questioners with the further query "Why do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (vs 25) You see, in the eyes of the Jews living at that time under Mosaic Law, baptism would have been reserved for the ritual cleansing of some pollution or for the initiation of a Gentile proselyte into the Jewish religion. For practicing Jews, circumcision, not baptism, was the sign of the Covenant, their special relationship with God. John explains that his rite of baptism by water merely foreshadows a greater baptism that was to be performed by the spirit, at the hands of a Greater one who was to come after him.

The passage in John's Gospel goes on to relate that John the Baptizer was not privileged in advance to know who that man would be, but the Messiah was revealed to him in the well-known scene when Jesus was baptized: The Gospel states (vss 32-34)

"Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'  
I, John, have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.'"

What a privilege John experienced to meet and launch the ministry of our Lord! But the story does not end here. Later, when John was placed in prison by King Herod and was facing the prospect of execution, Matthew (11:2-6) gives this account:

”When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’

Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.’

This last episode in John’s interaction with the Messiah should challenge us, and perhaps lend some comfort as well. If faith is defined as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,” then John the Baptizer illustrates how faith does not preclude the need to seek and ask questions of our Lord. John SAW the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus at His baptism. John SAW the Heavens part and John HEARD God’s voice saying “This is my Son, with Him I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17; cf. Mk 1:11), yet John, despite his privileged witness, which none of us can directly share, felt the need to send disciples to ask Jesus directly “Are you the one?”.

Where, then, are you and I to turn in order to maintain our faith, to “keep steady our hope and be certain of what we do NOT see”, if John, who saw with his own eyes and heard with his ears, felt the need to seek and question. The answer, I offer you, the only one I can offer, is the Scriptures. Study this text. Immerse yourself in it; make it your own. Don’t give it just half an ear on Sunday, but read and study the Word of God every day. Make family time to read and feed on God’s word. Join a group of fellow Christians and study God’s word. Right here, at St Christopher’s, know that every Thursday night at 7:30 you will receive a warm welcome at the drop-in Bible study being led by Holly Burt. I have learned so much from being a participant in that study ever since the group began meeting more than a decade ago, and I invite all who desire a closer relationship with their God to join that group. Come join the Thursday night group, or find a group in which you feel at home. But don’t hesitate to take to God your hopes and fears, and yes, even your doubts. He is the one resource on which you can always depend.

Amen.