

Advent 3B, December 13, 2020. John 1:6-8, 19-28.

Every day this week, the pandemic touched this church directly. Every day someone this church loves tested positive, or was hospitalized, or in one case, died. We know that there's light at the end of the tunnel, but those last few months before we get there are looking pretty rough. And despite the best efforts of many of us, we won't all get there. I don't know how your mood is, but this is the week that I ran out of optimism. I ran out of holly jolly and good cheer, at precisely that time when our market is most interested in pulling those good easy shallow smiles as wide as possible.

I have run out of optimism, but I have not run out of hope. The coming of Christmas assures us that Christian hope is always being born anew. Each Christmas, hope comes again among us. When the nights are longest and our wait for dawn seems most interminable, when our optimism is run out and so is our energy, hope comes again and again and again. It is more durable than the pretty good jollity of cultural Christmas; it is deeper and more durable than the forces of despair.

God's hope always comes again, and often in the same way: in great humility, in weakness and vulnerability, first to the folks who are poor, forgotten, and on the edges of our society. Good news to the oppressed, healing for the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, and comfort to all who mourn. God's hope comes not with shock and awe, but with wonder and delight. It does not come to arm wrestle the devil, or bringing sword and gun. It comes to us as invitation and asks us to nurture it. At the time when we most need it, it comes in unexpected ways and restores us but also makes claims on us. The coming of Christmas is hope for us, and it is also work for us. It asks us to do something, because God continues to come to us in humility and vulnerability. This baby is the Word who was there at the creation of the world—and he still needs to be fed and have his diaper changed and be held while we pace back and forth and back and forth and back and forth through all hours of the night.

And so Christmas is coming, and the Christian hope does not waver but is always being reborn to us, coming among us, restoring us and asking things of us. *And* these are days of astonishing difficulty, days that suffocate optimism. What does John the Baptist have to teach us during this time when hope is coming and optimism cannot be sustained? I think primarily a hard to find clarity, a rigorous humility, and focused work in light of the salvation that is coming.

You may have noticed that John doesn't seem to have much interest in the questions the religious leaders ask him. To a couple of them, he gives monosyllabic answers, answers that seem closer to grunts than song. I am not. No. And at other times his responses don't seem to be direct answers to their questions. There is certain information they want from him, but he doesn't really care about giving the answers they are looking for. He knows what he wants to say, and he is going to say it almost regardless of what the question is. Why do you baptize? Well, let me tell you about the one who is coming. Who are you? Let me tell you who I am not, and at the same time talk about the messiah. As a lesson for this time, I take from this that we have some control over own attention. When we have clarity about what we really care about, what really makes or

mars the effort to live faithfully in this bent but blessed world, we are better equipped not to be distracted by every infuriating triviality. There are more than enough important things to pay attention to. And learning to prioritize them is a skill that takes some discipline and is best perfected in community.

I am always struck by John's humility in this passage. He has set a ridiculously high bar for his ministry, and is pulling it off. He dresses like a wild man and sets up camp in a dangerous and inconvenient area and asks people to trust him to dunk them under treacherous waters. And they won't stop coming. And yet, he never gets carried away: he knows exactly who he is and who he is not. As a Christian virtue, humility is not a matter of thinking poorly of ourselves. It is about seeing ourselves truly—knowing both our gifts and our limits. Knowing both where we need help, and where we can be of help. John somehow unfailingly sees himself truly. There is work for him to do, and he never shies away from doing it. But not all work is his to do. We can only afford to be humble when we also rely on faith and trust. We can do our work when we trust that God and our friends will see the other work done.

If any of us were pressed, I think that like John we would be humble enough to deny being the messiah. But what we might be more prone to is living as if there were no messiah. We know that we cannot, by ourselves, save the world. But we do not always live as if the world is being saved by God. And my friends, let me assure you, just because we cannot save the world does not mean that the world is not being saved. John refers everything back to the one who is to come. He knows how the world's salvation comes, and he lives his life in light of that coming salvation. It is a hope that makes him strange, because the world does not know that it is being saved. It is a hope that will make us strange. It is a hope that calls us to find humility, where we know what we are called to do in the dawning light of God's great work. It is a hope that will give us life. The light is coming into the world. And though the world may not know it, the light will not be overcome. Let us live even now in the light of God's coming salvation. Amen.