

B Advent 3 12.14.23

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Focus Statement: We are not the Messiah.

The focus hymn for last Thursday's midweek service at St. Peter was "All Earth is Hopeful," so I've been thinking a lot about hope this week. You might remember we sang that hymn as the hymn of the day last Sunday. Turns out it would have been a good choice for this Sunday as well, but alas sometimes the hymn list is due before the Spirit shows up to work on the sermon, so here we are. Wake, Awake is also a good, hopeful hymn, as is Rejoice, Rejoice Believers, so it's not like we have dour hymns for this morning.

But anyway, possibly because I had good high school English teachers, the word "hope" for me always triggers memories of the Emily Dickenson poem, about how "'Hope" is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words -And never stops - at all." The quality of my high school education is, I assume, the only reason I make this association. Because I've always thought of hope as made of tougher stuff than that. Dickenson's hope is persistent, but feels so fragile, sweet and giving, and not near strong enough for a concept like hope.

A poem about hope that I find truer is one by Caitlin Seida, "Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat." "Hope" writes Seida, "is not the thing with feathers / Hope is an ugly thing / With teeth and claws and / Patchy fur. / It's what thrives in the discards / And survives in the ugliest parts of our world, / Able to find a way to go on / When nothing else can even find a way in. / It's the gritty, nasty little carrier of such

diseases as / optimism, persistence, / Perseverance and joy, / Transmissible as it drags its tail across / your path.”

Sewer rat hope got me thinking about John the Baptist. The Gospel of John’s version of John the Baptist isn’t quite as wild as the synoptic Gospels—there are no clothes of camel’s hair or eating of bugs—but he’s still “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” He’s still engaging in verbal sparring with the religious authorities. He’s still attracting people to himself with the hope of pointing them to Jesus. John the Baptist’s task in John’s Gospel is no less daunting, to declare the impossible promise of God’s presence in a world that had desired so long for a Messiah, that wanting a Messiah to come was more appealing than one actually showing up and shaking things around.

That’s really the problem John the Baptist was facing. The religious leadership had led the people in longing for a Messiah to come for so long, that if one were actually to show up, it would be a tremendous threat to the status quo. Especially considering the very tenuous “peace,” if you can even call it that, which they were currently holding with the Roman occupiers. Wanting an impossible thing, knowing that thing can never actually occur, is a good way to keep people frozen and inactive. Wanting a thing you have no hope or power of making real is a passive activity. We can want all we want, and nothing will come of it.

Then here comes John the Baptist demanding action. And not just action, action that points to another. One of my favorite verses in this passage is verse twenty. “[John] confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’” Here’s what’s so great about that

verse, and particularly about the way John phrased it. One of the trademarks of the Gospel of John is what is known as Jesus's "I am" statements. You've certainly heard these before, "I am the good shepherd," "I am the bread of life," "I am the living water," "I am the way, and the truth and the life," "I am the gate for the sheep." There's either seven or twelve of them, all told. I can't remember exactly how many. The "I am" statements pull from a story we read earlier in the summer, the story of Moses and the burning bush, where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush to send him to set God's people free from Pharaoh. And when Moses asked God, what is your name? "God replied, "I am who I am... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am' has sent me to you." The "I am" statements in John's Gospel link Jesus to the divine name that God gave to Moses back at the Exodus, a name Jesus then puts flesh to, adding these identifiers of what it means to be the one who's name is "I am."

John the Baptist hooked onto that same grammatical rhetoric to make abundantly clear who he was not. "I am not the Messiah." I am not the I am, John said with this statement. I am not the divine, I am not even Elijah or a prophet. I am no more than the voice of one, which Tresa pointed out in bible study, John didn't even claim to be The Voice, just one voice, presumably of many, "crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

We talk about John the Baptist as humble, but I think what he shows here is more than humility, it's realness. John spoke with authority, taught with authority, baptized with authority, because he knew the limits of who he was and who he was not, and he was not the Messiah.

And more than just authority, I think the reality of his knowledge of himself gave him hope, and the perseverance to maintain that hope when everything seemed hopeless, to speak the truth amid impossible threats, to stand up to power even as that power would eventually destroy him. He had hope because he knew exactly what his role was, and what it was not. He could play his part in the story, trusting that the story would carry long beyond him, because he was not the Messiah.

Dear people of God, the good news I take from this text is John was not the Messiah, and neither are we. That's not our job, not our role, not our place in the story. We, unequivocally, are not the Messiah. Dear people of God, this is good news because there are so many things in our world that feel hopelessly beyond our control, too big for us to have any stake in turning around, too intractable for one person to shift. There are so many voices telling us there is nothing you can do. These are problems bigger than an individual, it is hopeless, why try. The climate crisis, gun violence, our country's slow, steady turn toward authoritarianism and the breakdown of civil conversation, just to name a few. These problems need global solutions, not the earnest wonderings of a handful of people in small town Michigan. What can we possibly do in the face of real crisis?

And the good news in this text is, we are not the Messiah. We have one, and it's not us. This reality frees us to not be hopeless, but to be hopeful. To do what we can do, to stand up for what we can, to make a difference within our sphere of influence, and not be discouraged when that work isn't enough, because we are not the Messiah.

An example of this. You may or may not know, I've gotten involved with the We Can't Wait campaign, which is fighting to bring back medical care for those affected by the changes in the auto no fault law changes in 2021. I got involved in this work through my friend Laurie and her son Dan. You all don't know this, but you've worshiped with Laurie and Dan before, they tune in on the livestream every so often. Dan was catastrophically injured in a car accident when he was ten years old. Now in his thirties, Dan is totally dependent on 24/7 care for everything. Care he lost when the auto no fault laws went into effect. To fight for the care Dan not only deserved and was promised, but needed, Dan and Laurie started making regular trips to Lansing to meet with senators and house members and advocate for changes in the law. I got involved through Laurie's invitation and have participated in a few rallies myself. They are powerful events where people who have suffered catastrophic injuries fight for themselves and each other. Two years later, things are better for Dan and Laurie as the law has recognized Dan should be grandfathered into the care he was receiving pre-law change. Not nearly as good as they were before, there are still far fewer places providing the care Dan needs, but better. But Dan and Laurie continue to fight. Not for Dan's care as much anymore, but for others who were not included in the updates.

Dan and Laurie could have given up at so many points. It's exhausting for Dan to travel to Lansing, exhausting for Laurie to take him. But they go because they believe that their work matters. They believe that people like Dan deserve care and support and dignity, and the flourishing they had. Dear people of God, this is John the Baptist, pointing beyond himself to say, this matters because in God's eyes all people matter. And I can't speak for

Laurie and Dan, but I have to assume that the persistence that keeps them going is equal parts desperation—Dan needs this care—and hope that their actions, however small, make a difference.

Dear people of God, there are so many ways large and small that we too can and do add our voices to impossible odds. There are six food baskets in the lounge right now for six families. Are we ending hunger with those food baskets? No, but we are making the holidays a little brighter for six families in our community. The social hall has LED bulbs and we didn't run the air conditioner for most of the summer. Did we solve global climate change? No, but we did our best to balance the needs of our community with the needs of our planet. Are these actions enough? No, but something is always better than nothing, because something is a step towards the next thing.

Dear people of God, we are not the messiah. We are not. And that is such good news, because it invites us to do whatever it is that we are called to do, to make a difference in whatever ways we can, to work, and serve, and pray together that God will use our work, and the work of so many others, to bring about God's kingdom. It's not all on our shoulders, we are just one voice. So, we need never give up hope that our work is not enough, because it was never meant to be. We are not the Messiah, thanks be to God, because we already have one. Amen.