

“Why Are You, Who Are You, Why Then?”

3rd Sunday of Advent – Joy

Virtual Liturgy

December 13, 2020

Advent Theme:

“Still Connected as We Prepare Ye The Way of The Lord”

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1st Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Poem “Crying Out in The Wilderness” by Dr. Anthony Theodore

*“After many years of
silence from the Lord,
John the Baptist was
the prophetic voice
crying in the wilderness,
'prepare ye the way of the Lord'”.*

*The Mosaic Law;
the feasts of the Lord;
the Aaronic priesthood;
the sacrificial offering;
the wilderness Tabernacle
and Solomon Temple
were all signposts that
pointed the people to Jesus.”*

It was the Christmas of 1968. Gerald Coffee was spending his third Christmas in prison. His Vietnamese guards gave some candy to him and to his fellow prisoners-of-war. He heard the guards outside talking and laughing with their families, celebrating Christmas. One of the guards had a son who was about three or four. Coffee thought of his own children back home. He ate the candy and looked at the red and silver foil. He began to form that foil into three shapes — a swan, a rosette, and a star. He thought of the star of Bethlehem. He placed those three shapes above his bed. He laid there looking at them. Then, he began thinking about the birth of Christ. He knew it was only faith that was getting him through this experience. He wrote later that in that place there was nothing to distract him from the awesomeness of Christmas, even though he had lost everything that defined who he was. He wrote, “Yet, I continued to find strength within. I realized that although I was hurting and lonely and scared, this might be the most significant Christmas of my life.”

Another story is about a family from my home state of New Mexico who visited Carlsbad Caverns while on vacation. They were down in the caves with a large group of tourists. The guide wanted to show them how dark it really was. He had the lights

turned off. The daughter of this family grabbed her big brother's hand. The brother said to her, "Don't worry. There is someone here who knows how to turn on the lights."

Beloved Iao Church, there is always someone here to know how to turn on the lights – Amen? Amid a pandemic, in the midst of darkness, someone always knows how to turn on that light.

In the midst of human suffering, we are sometimes sent on a wilderness journey to testify to the light. John tells us that he is one who is crying out in the wilderness, the one who is also fulfilling scripture foretold by the prophet Isaiah. A voice screaming, yelling, testifying about a light that is to come. As John uses water to baptize, to prepare those who would believe in this light that is to come, that that light would baptize by the Holy spirit. Imagine beloved community - the question that was being asked by many in John's time – "How long Lord – how long do we have to wait for deliverance?" People were suffering. People were hungry for both physical and spiritual food. People were oppressed by their Roman rulers. "How long Lord, how long?"

John comes on to the scene and people began to listen. People who for so long hungered for some good news. When we read today's scripture, we can only imagine how human suffering had

become normalized. Living in darkness had become normalized. Hopelessness living had become normalized. John offered hope. John offered preparation. John pointed toward the light at the end of a long storm. After many years of suffering, who wouldn't want to listen? The cleansing of water offered people a new normal, a better and bright future. But as always seems to happen to someone with “good news” – here come the doubters, the nay sayers, the why are you people. The who are you people. The ok, we hear you – only to be followed up by the – why then people.

You see beloved community; the Pharisees didn't go themselves – maybe they were too busy at the temple trying to figure out who's in and who's out. No! They sent priests and Levites to question John. Never mind that people were beginning to feel hopeful, inspired, waking up from their internal darkness by John's message – cannot have that now can we? Who are you? Just a regular guy testifying to the light to come. Not the Messiah, not Elijah – just a voice out here crying right along with the poor – the ones you all have forgotten. Why are you baptizing then if you are not the Messiah or Elijah and not even a prophet? Just preparing the way for the one that stands amongst you, and get this Mr.

priests and Mr. Levites, you do not know him yet but you will soon. He is the light of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

You see beloved church, for so long, the religious leaders had forgotten about the people out on the streets. The people's suffering was forgotten. They had forgotten how to inspire and bring hope to the very people they were supposed to be serving. They were so caught up on law, traditions, rules, self-preservation and keeping the Romans happy that the people of God were left out.

Iao Church – Who are you? Why are you Iao church? We can look to our mission statement and answer part of these questions. We are people of God who have no problem in being the voice out in our community for justice, peace, hope, joy, love when we need to be. Even if we are the only voice, a voice that welcomes ALL people no matter who they are, where they come from, or who they love. We, Iao Church, are a voice that inspires the better angels in everyone we encounter. We must answer these questions ourselves because, as I have mentioned before, others who would do us harm will answer for us and it may not be the answer we want to hear or the answer that defines who we are as Iao church, as defined by the Pharisees of our time. Who are you Iao Church?

Why are you? Why are we a church? What is it that we do that tells our community the “why” we are a church? We baptize with water and invoke the Holy spirit of God and proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We do all this because we are called to answer the voices of suffering, the voices that seek some sort of hope during a pandemic. We answer the call as wilderness people, who like John, directing people to the Bethlehem star, the light that is to come. Why are you Iao church?

Why then? Our own baptism reminds us why we call ourselves “Christians.” Our baptism does not call us to sit by as people suffer. Does not call us to sit and watch while injustices happen around us. We are called to be a church that inspires, invites, brings hope, not one of idleness, not one of finger pointing, not one of coercion, but a church that feeds God’s people with food, hope, peace, joy and love. We are a church that is constantly answer or strives to answer the “when was it Jesus” question because we see Christ in all the people we encounter.

Let us close with this beloved community. Let us live out the light of Christ in and through our House Churches. Let us be that Bethlehem star that shines bright so that our first responders can somehow find hope through this pandemic storm. Let us shine

bright so that the families who have lost loved ones this year can find hope in the Christ child. Let those who see Iao Church in action know who we are, why we are and why we do the things we do as a church.

Amen, Amene, Ashe, A-ho, and Alleluia.