

Who are you?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017.

What do you say about yourself? John 1:22

Advent is a time of hope, expectation, and rejoicing. This third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin “to rejoice.” The centerpiece of this season is to rejoice in the hope of justice for all God’s people.

The prophet Isaiah writes that God anointed him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. God will comfort all who mourn and give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Centuries later John the Baptist appears as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy as the voice in the wilderness. John is an eccentric but forceful personality living an ascetic and solitary life in the wilderness dressed in animal skin and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey. Not only does John know who he is, more importantly he knows what he is not. He is not the Christ and never lets his dynamic and charismatic personality divert attention from the One whom he proclaims. He focuses on calling us to repentance. If we are going to save ourselves from being our own worst enemy, we will need to make changes in the way we live.

John is the advance man bearing witness to the incarnation of God in Christ. He is like a stained glass window being completely transparent in letting the light of Christ shine through him. The light of Christ illuminates the corners of our lives, allowing us to appreciate who we really are.

When the leaders of the religious establishment question John’s authority, he makes clear that the one who comes after him is greater than he whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. When the priests and Levites question John’s right to baptize if he is neither the Christ nor a prophet, John tells them that he baptizes with water, but the one who is greater than he will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John’s authority is derived from speaking God’s truth with conviction.

One of the great issues of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century was the matter of authority. The reformers taught that we have direct access to God and no one can stand in the way of our knowing God through reading the scriptures. We are given authority at our baptism to seek Christ in all whom we meet and to strive for justice and peace by respecting the dignity of every human being. We act not on our own, but by God’s power working in us. We gain our authenticity by living the example of Christ in all we do at all times and in all places.

We all need to examine where we are headed. If we don’t like what we see, we do what is necessary to turn our life around. You may be thinking that you are not such a bad person. You are reasonably happy with who you are and how you live. You may not feel you need to change anything, but if you look into the recesses of your life, there may be paths you follow that require your changing your course one way or the other.

Near where I live there used to be a very dangerous curve in the roadway that contributed to several fatal accidents. After the town highway department reconfigured the roadway, it was made safer for traveling. In the same way we need to make our pathways in life safer for traveling. This season of Advent is a time to survey the paths we follow that lead us astray.

As we approach the Christmas season shopping for gifts from catalogues and making purchases with the press of a button saves us from waiting in long lines and getting frayed nerves. We should be feeling less stress but it still seems that we don’t have enough time. Instead of worrying about getting it all done, it is better to put your energy into choosing gifts that reflect how you feel about those who receive them. The best gift you can give to those you care for is your very best self at all times.

Now is the best time to reconfigure your interior life by reserving some quiet time with God, whether in the morning, at midday, or in the evening. This is the time to prepare for Christ to be at the center of our lives. Whether you practice yoga, daily meditation, prayer or just reserving time to be alone in silence, center on who and what means the most to you. Contemplate the sacred in both friend and stranger, especially those who may be bearing a burden of which you are unaware.

The question asked of John the Baptist is asked of us. Who are you? What do you say about yourself? Do you find yourself being intolerant and dismissive of those who come at life differently from you? We all share the same human needs and we all need to focus on common concerns. The more we try to understand those who think differently from us, the better we can work together for the common good.

Advent is about waiting. As we wait in lines in stores and for packages to be delivered, remember those who wait at food pantries who have little or nothing to celebrate this season. Remember the elderly and disabled who wait for their pension and social security checks to arrive so they can pay the rent, put food on the table and pay for prescriptions. Remember those who wait anxiously for a diagnosis of a serious disease or disorder. Remember the families of soldiers, sailors and airmen, the firefighters and police and their families who await their safe return.

The things for which we wait have a way of shaping our lives. Pray for those who wait anxiously in hospital emergency rooms and those who await a diagnosis. Remember those who wait for those who are returning home; those who wait in fear and trepidation, real or imagined, whose anxiety grows with every passing hour. And remember those who wait for you. Bless them.