Advent 3 December 17, 2017

All Saints’ Year B

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Psalm 126 John 1:6-8; 19-28

Stir up your power and with great might come among us.

Out of the stark wilderness of the desert, comes John the Baptist with good news to the oppressed: the binding up of the brokenhearted, the proclaiming of liberty to captives, and the release of prisoners. People from all the lands are coming -to hear his word- his invitation to turn away from fear and doubt, and to turn toward the gift of water- the power and grace of reconciliation and salvation and hope.

John the Baptist is a force, a command, resolute with followers and prophetic authority, and yet he is pointing to the One beyond him, one of whom we’ve never seen the likes of before. This is the true Word, who was with God from the beginning of Creation. Logos, the Word of God, who brooded over the waters of the deep, within the start of all life, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, who is here in our midst, in the flesh; the One whom John is not worthy even to untie his sandals. John is pointing the way:

Jesus is not just the Word of God, like John and the prophets who came before him, he is more. Jesus, the Christ, is the ***Dynamic Living*** Word of God, the Holy Spirit which knows no beginning or end, inclusive of the alpha and the omega, and beyond: the very presence of Creation itself, a circle whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, (St. Augustine) which lives within our soul forever.

Advent invites us to think of those among us who have been our John the Baptist- who have pointed to us the way to the Living Loving Christ.

Who in your life, has pointed to you the way to freedom and integrity? Who in your life, has humbled themselves to your service, to challenge you to a new view, a new start, a new way of beginning tomorrow? Who in your life has lifted up your burden of worries and guilt and forgiven you? Who in your life has given you the courage to believe again in hope, no matter how dire the situation or circumstances?

These John the Baptist folks often come uninvited, as a surprise, maybe strangely dressed, out of the ordinary, and who shock us into a deeper place where we instinctively want to live and move and have our being. We just sometimes don’t know the way. Yet, when we see the path before us, we know that we are being beckoned to walk with a new step.

And we know it, without hesitation, these John the Baptists are pointing us to New Life.

One of our parishioners told me about one of her days working at the Food Pantry and a man, a bit disheveled, appeared out of nowhere at the doors with a line of shopping carts behind him filled with food. When asked what was up, he announced that he tithes his grocery bill for the year… in food. He apologized- he was a little bit behind, but he was making a delivery. I love the image of a cold winter morning, snow on the ground, the wind blowing, and a man, walking with grocery carts and lining them up, out the door, all brimming with food, because this one man, this John the Baptist, tithes with food.

An Advent story pointing the way to the Christ.

Another parishioner sent me an article about two Miami preschoolers Jia Sarnicola and Zuri Copeland who say they are not best friends. They say they are closer than that… closer than even mere sisters.

In fact, Jia and Zuri truly believe they’re twins. And they have a long list of reasons why to back it up. Similarities. They are four, with practically the same birthday, and obviously they look alike (long curly hair) and so many other physical similarities! They insist on wearing matching outfits. Their mothers are indulging them, but the mothers are also fearful and sad because they have to grow up and then “society will take over.”

It’s already happening. The girls were at a birthday party and one of the older kids said, “You can’t be twins because you don’t have the same skin color.” Jia broke down, but through tears, she blurted:

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re twins because we share the same soul.”

In the midst of all our strife, division and worry, these two little girls speak into the wilderness of our brokenness, to speak to our souls, and together as twins to bind us up, the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to us captives who are mired down in our strife and fear. There’s more that we share in common than we can ever imagine. We are all twins, sharing the same soul. Just look, inside and you’ll find it!

These twin sisters come to us as John the Baptist.

Who are your John the Baptists? We have many pointing the way to the Christ, if only we spend the time and attention to look and see.

One of mine is Father Justin, a Greek Orthodox monk who lives at Saint Catherine’s Monastery at the base of Mount Sinai, with his library office right next door to the Burning Bush of Moses. Indeed, he is a voice, out of the real desert wilderness, not the metaphorical one, and lives off honey and wild locusts and hummus.

He is cinched in ropes, dressed in a black robe and wears sandals. He looks out to the world through bushy eyebrows, unkempt long hair, long beard, and long mustache.

He works day by day reproducing some of the most ancient religious texts known in the world. His specialty are palimpsests, ancient manuscripts where the original writing has been erased, like a second century Gospel written in Syriac in the background, with a new story written to tell the lives of saints, sketched in calligraphy in 778.

Just to be in the presence of these sacred texts in real time or by viewing through the internet, brings tears to my eyes. And sometimes when I’m down, I think of the miracle of seeing these texts as John the Baptist pointing the way to the power of our faith.

I met Father Justin about ten years ago, and the irony is not lost on me that I keep in touch with my John the Baptist of the Sinai desert through the internet- we email back and forth, and he has a fantastic blog, which he admits, “I’ve been told that blogs are old fashioned now as everyone has moved on to Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. It’s nice to feel old fashioned about this.”

One of the most important conversations I have had with Father Justin was about prayer. He told me that one of the reasons he moved from being a Texan fundamentalist in the Bible Belt to a secluded monk in the Sinai desert was his invitation from God to pray unceasingly.

“Prayer is what we were made for, if we seek God in prayer, we won’t be able to stop ourselves from praying for others. It’s beside the point if prayer does any good. Praying is the most natural thing in the world. Prayer is the hunger for God within us, calling to the God who created us.

“When we are praying, we are participating in God’s work. Praying through words, silence and loving acts is the way I am doing God’s work.”

Fr. Justin helped me to be more real in my prayer and to believe in it. That by praying for others, we are quickening the spirit of whom we pray, awakening within them their own hunger, and putting them within the path of the vast creative energies of God.

We are all connected, soul twins, feeding the world in the best ways we can. And by praying through words, silence and loving acts, we all become John the Baptists pointing to Jesus, the Christ, as the ***Dynamic Living Loving*** Word of God, the Light of the Holy Spirit, which knows no beginning or end, always helping us to fill the space between us, so that we can be woven into all the ways God is putting us to work.

Thank you, to all of the John the Baptists who have leaned into our lives, blessing us with garments of salvation. AMEN.