



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Fourth Sunday in Advent: Testimony

**Philippians 4:4-7 &  
St. John 1:19-28**

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As we make our way through Advent the days get darker and there's something oh so appropriate about that as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It's a reminder of the state that Israel was in as the gospel story began—in those days of Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and King Herod. The world was dark. The nations were enslaved to false gods and pagan kings. Even little Israel, called to be the light of the world, lay in darkness. The candlestick in the temple was kept lit, but the cloud of glory that had once filled the holy of holies, the very presence of God, had been absent for five-hundred years. God's people were ruled by pagans and pretenders. And apart from a faithful remnant, the nation had been consumed by the darkness, a holy people in little other than their calling. But the people knew the words of the prophets, the promises of their God. It would not be this way forever. That's the setting for today's Gospel, which begins at John 1:19. Here's what John writes:

**This is the testimony of John [the Baptist], when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"**

**He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:19-28)**

The Pharisees sent Levitical and priestly inquirers to interrogate John, to find out who he was—or at least who he *thought* he was. If someone showed up with a message from God, the Pharisees were sure to show up and to ask questions to see if he was legit. The Jews really were expecting someone. John anticipates this in his answers. They ask who he thinks he is and the first thing he says is, "I am not the Messiah." That's who everyone was really anxious to see. The Messiah would lift the darkness. The Messiah would fix everything that was wrong with the world. The Messiah would deliver his people and reign as David had long ago. There had been others in recent memory who had claimed to be the Messiah and things hadn't gone well for them. I expect the Pharisees expected the same was true of John, but hey, you never know. Eventually the real Messiah would come, they were certain of that, so they might as well ask some questions.

"Well, then," they ask, "who do you claim to be?" John first denies that he's Elijah and then he denies that he's "the prophet". The bit about Elijah goes back to the prophet Malachi. He had prophesied that Elijah, the greatest of Israel's prophets (or at least the greatest after Moses) would return one day. This is what he wrote:

**Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.** (Malachi 4:5)

We have a pretty good sense, based on the literature of the time, that a lot of people interpreted this to mean that Elijah himself would literally return in the flesh. Sort of like King Arthur to return to rescue Britain at its darkest hour. It made sense. Remember that Elijah didn't die. He was caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire. Some

people thought he would come back as the Messiah. John's answer is interesting, because in last week's Gospel we heard Jesus himself say that John was the one who fulfilled Malachi's prophecy. John was indeed the *one*. But John didn't see it that way. He hadn't come to earth in a fiery chariot from heaven. He was the son of Zechariah the priest and his wife, Elizabeth.

John also denies, too, that he's "the prophet". This is a reference to a passage in Deuteronomy 18 in which the Lord promises that he will one day raise up a prophet like Moses, who will declare the Lord's own words. Like the Elijah who was to come, many associated the prophet with the Messiah. "Nope," John says, "that's not me either." But here's the point. Even if they were wrong about who the Messiah would be and when and how he would come, the Jews were living in hopeful expectation of the Messiah. They were in their own Advent. The days were dark. They were supposed to be the people who lived with the Lord in their midst, but his presence had been gone for five hundred years. They'd returned from exile, but without the Lord's presence and with foreign pagans ruling over them, they might as well have still been in exile. They longed for the light to dawn in the darkness and they trusted it would happen, because they knew their story. They knew that the Lord is faithful to fulfil his promises. They belonged to him. Just as he'd once rescued them from Pharaoh, he would rescue them from Caesar.

John was sure of all this, too. He may have denied that he was the one prophesied to come like Elijah or Moses—and it's worth noting again that in Matthew and Mark Jesus actually did affirm that John had come in fulfilment of the Elijah prophecy—but John knew the story, too, and he knew his place in it. When the Pharisees finally let John speak for himself, he told them: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

He quotes straight from Isaiah 40:3. I think this gets at the reason John answered “No” to the questions about Elijah and the Prophet, but given the chance to identify himself, he looks back to this prophecy of Isaiah. This passage from Isaiah is just as Messianic, but John saw in it the heart of his role and his ministry. And while there were people who confused the one coming like Elijah or Moses with the Messiah, this voice crying in the wilderness is clearly the Messiah’s forerunner—or at least that’s how John saw it. He was not the Messiah. He was the one sent ahead to prepare Israel to receive the Messiah.

And then the question they pose about baptism gives him a chance to expand on this. Baptism was an act of cleansing that fit well with what the Messiah might be and do when he came. But John has just denied that he is the Messiah. “So,” the Pharisees wonder, “why is John baptizing people if he’s not the Messiah?” Look at 25-27:

**They asked him, “So why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, he who comes after me, whose sandals I’m not worthy to untie.”**

Baptism was a symbol of cleansing and of ritual purity. At this point the other gospel-writers are helpful as they expand on John’s answer. Mark tells us that John’s was a baptism of repentance—it was a preparatory act in light of the coming judgement the Messiah would bring. And Matthew and Luke also report John continuing about this one who will come, this one greater than John: “He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16). In other words, John is calling Israel to repentance in anticipation of the Messiah, who will fulfil the Lord’s promises to set Israel to rights by filling his people with his own Spirit.

The law written on stone tablets would finally be inscribed on the hearts of God’s people so that they could finally fulfil his law of love. But the Messiah was also coming in judgement. He would baptise the repentant with God’s own Spirit, but he would baptise unrepentant Israel with fire.

These are the two sides of the gospel coin. You can’t have one without the other. Jesus’ advent, on the one hand, brought mercy to the repentant, but on the other it also brought judgement on the unrepentant within Israel. What’s significant for us here, Brothers and Sisters, is that this exchange between John and the Pharisees reminds us of the Messiah’s place in Israel’s story and of the faithfulness of God to his promises. It is this manifestation of the Lord’s faithfulness (and of his goodness, mercy, grace, and wisdom) to Israel—something we see brought to its climax in the coming, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus, that has drawn *us* to the God of Israel and that, by faith, has incorporated us into the people of God. Through our union with Jesus, through our incorporation into this people, through our being made adopted sons and daughters of Abraham, you and I have come to know God’s mercy and the life of the Spirit, too. Because of the faithfulness of God, revealed in Jesus and in the power of the gospel, the darkness that Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist and Jesus knew, that deep, deep darkness full of false gods and wicked kings and demonic power is has been driven away by the light. The light has come into the darkness, his gospel has thrown those powers down and lit up the world. And you and I live in the glory of that light. And this is where our Epistle today takes off. There are practical implications of our being incorporated into the story of the people of God.

Paul writes those wonderful and challenging words in Philippians 4:4:

**Rejoice in the Lord always; I say again, rejoice.**

What specifically prompted Paul to write this? Well, just two verses earlier, Paul exhorted two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other. They had once been fellow labourers with Paul, but they’d had some kind of falling out. There’s something providential in the fact that Paul doesn’t give us the details, because with no details I think we all end up thinking of the fallings out we’ve had with other brothers and sister in the Lord. This isn’t just about two women in Philippi. It’s about each of us. In response to that falling out, Paul calls the Philippian Christian to rejoice in the Lord. Instead of a public display of disunity or resentment or anger—whatever it was that was going on between these two women, the Church was to put joy on display, to celebrate the life of God. They were people of the light, but they were living in the dark. It was imperative that they come back into the light. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus and the gospel should overcome and drown out the darkness whenever it tries to creep into the Church. Here’s how it works. Paul writes:

**Let your gracious gentleness be known to everyone.** (Philippians 4:5a)

Gracious gentleness—or gentle graciousness. Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians 10 to describe the meekness of Jesus as a model for Christians. This is gospel light lived out. What Paul’s getting at is that Jesus is the King, but in him we see this amazing display of gracious gentleness. This is the gentleness we see revealed as Jesus, the one to whom heaven and earth belong, humbles himself to be born one of us, to die on the cross, and to show mercy to his enemies. This kind of meekness or gentleness is unique to Jesus, and yet Paul stresses that as his people, as stewards of the gospel, we’re called to witness this same gentleness amongst

ourselves. As it should be the resolution to so many disputes in the Church, it was the resolution to whatever had driven Euodia and Syntyche apart.

Brothers and Sisters, when we demand our rights, when we grasp for power, when we nurse grudges, we undermine our witness to the world—we exhibit the very darkness from which we've been delivered by the one who is light. In contrast Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord and to manifest Jesus-like gentleness in our relationships. Remember, as people whom God has graciously and mercifully forgiven and restored to himself, we ought to witness that in our own joyful unity in Jesus. Consider that every time we hold a grudge, allow a relationship to break down, or follow the world's advice to cut those problem or negative people out of our lives, we undermine the Church's witness to the world. But that's not all. Paul goes on:

**The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

There's that Advent theme again: Jesus has given us a job to do. He's given us treasure to steward in his absence. In the meantime, rather than being anxious, we should take our needs to God. Jesus made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount. The pagans worry about what they'll eat, what they'll wear, and where they'll sleep. God's people should know better than to worry unduly about these things. God will provide just as he always has. He is faithful to his promises and the story of his dealings with Israel is the proof. So go to the Lord with your needs and ask. And while you're at it, give thanks, because you know his faithfulness and his love.

This is part of the witness of the people of God—it's how we are light in the darkness—and it ties back into rejoicing. When Paul talks about rejoicing, at least part of what he's got in mind is a public display or a public witness. The pagan Greeks in Philippi regularly held public celebrations to honour their gods. In the decades before Paul wrote, new rites to honour and to celebrate—to rejoice in—Caesar had been introduced and embraced by the people. And yet the pagans, as Jesus said, were always anxious. Why? Because their gods never delivered. Pagan religion was a non-stop game of trial and error, trying to guess what the gods wanted, trying to guess what you may have done wrong to offend them, and then guessing at what you might offer to appease their anger or to ingratiate them to you in order to get what you needed or wanted. The pagan gods were silent and they were notoriously capricious and unreliable. And in this context Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians: Rejoice yourselves. Let the pagans see you celebrating the fact that the Creator of the universe has, through Jesus, made you his own and lives in your midst by his own Holy Spirit. Let the pagans, who know only mean and capricious gods and who live in a dog-eat-dog world, let them see the gracious gentleness of God in you. Live in such a way that they see in you the God who humbles himself to die for the sake of his enemies. And let the pagans see you living in faith, praying in confident thankfulness to the God whose story reveals an unfailing pattern of promise and fulfilment. Shine the light of Jesus into the darkness of the world. And the result of all this? Look at verse 7:

**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

I think we tend to look at Paul's exhortation here as something we should do in order to experience the

peace of God ourselves, but given the context in Philippians, I think Paul's point is actually more about our witness. If we truly live as stewards of the good news about Jesus, if we truly live as people who know the faithfulness of God revealed in Jesus and particularly in his death and resurrection, the peace of God—rather than the strife and anxiety of the world—will guard our hearts and minds in a way that will astound the pagans around us.

I said last Sunday that we are called both to proclaim and to live the gospel. This is that living it, right here. And coupled with our proclamation, to truly live in light of Jesus and what he reveals about God, should cause the world to stand up and take note. This is sort of our way of being John the Baptist in our own age. And as it did for John, for us—if we are faithful—it will result in many giving glory to God for his faithfulness and then coming to him in faith as we have. *And* it will threaten many who are invested in the pagan and fallen systems of the world. We are now the voice in the wilderness.

So we need to ask: Does the world see our joy? Are we the voice crying in the wilderness? Are we the royal heralds the Lord has called us to be, summoning the world to let go of its false gods and to come to the Lord Jesus, calling the world away from sin and self and to come to the cross? And we need to ask how the world is responding to us. If we're faithfully proclaiming the good news about Jesus, if we're faithfully calling people to repent and to believe, if we're faithfully proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and that this kingdom has come—well—people will respond in one of two ways. Either they'll believe or they'll get angry—as Herod got angry with John. There's some of both out there in the world, but overwhelmingly, when I look at how people respond to or think of the church these days and in our part of the world, it's just indifference. Why?

Because we have not been the witnesses God calls us to be. We have been mealy-mouthed and, quite often, just plain silent in our proclamation, because we have too often sought to please people rather than God, and because we have been half-hearted and unfaithful in our gospel living. Like old Israel, we pray to God, but we've failed to tear down the old altars to Baal and Asherah—or Mammon or Aphrodite or Caesar. We name Jesus, but we deal dishonestly in business, we sell our souls to the commercialism that surrounds us, we look to politics or to science as our saviours, and we dabble in the sexual immorality of the age. We've failed to proclaim the gospel and we justify it, saying that we'll preach it with our lives. But if we stop to ask what the world sees in our lives, is it really very different? Does the world see us rejoicing in the Lord? Does the world see us manifesting the gracious gentleness of Jesus? Does the world see us living in faithful prayer and trusting in God, or does it see people just as anxious as everyone else? Does the world see the peace of God ruling our hearts and minds? Does the world see us, holding high the gospel, as a challenge to its gods and its kings and its sins? It should. But sadly, I think that for the Western Church at large, the answer is often "no".

And, all too often, when we do proclaim the gospel, we do so without power or authority. We hold the gospel out as good advice, rather than as the good news that it is. Friends, the gospel is the royal summons to submit in faith to Jesus, the world's true Lord—the Lord who has come with mercy so that the repentant will escape when he comes one day in judgement. This was the power behind John the Baptist' preaching. But all too often we present the gospel as just another option on the religious smorgasbord—something you might want to try. See if you like it. See if it works for you. If not...oh well. Brothers and Sisters, that's not the

gospel. The gospel is good news to the people living in the midst of darkness: the king who will set the world to rights has come. And that means the gospel, when preached as it should be, will challenge and upset the Herods and Caesars of our age and all those invested in the false gods of the world.

The Advent message is to be prepared. Jesus has given us a gospel mission to take the good news of his death, his resurrection, and his lordship into the world. Brothers and Sisters, pray that we will be faithful to our mission—faithful enough to provoke persecution, because that's the kind of faithfulness that also reaps a harvest for the kingdom. Pray for the holy boldness of John the Baptist and the gracious gentleness of Jesus. Pray that we will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Pray that the joy of the Lord will overcome us. Brothers and Sisters, Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice.

Let's pray: O Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and strengthen us with your great might; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*