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Advent 3B
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

“Joy Is On Its Way”

This past week the New York Times published two stories worthy of our attention this morning.

The first story is about the higher rates of coronavirus infections among Black and Hispanic Americans. The second story is about the president’s inner circle receiving highly rationed COVID-19 therapies. Both articles focus on the huge inequities the pandemic has exposed.

The first story is interesting in that it debunks the claim that Black and Hispanic COVID patients are more likely to be hospitalized and die from COVID because they’re Black or Hispanic. It instead exposes the research that Black and Hispanic Americans are more likely to become infected with COVID because they are more exposed to COVID. It’s a fine point, so let me explain. Among the many vulnerabilities Black and Hispanic communities face, they tend to live in households that are more crowded, work jobs requiring frequent contact with others, and they rely more on public transportation. Their access to healthcare is also poorer than among white Americans, and rates of underlying health conditions that leave them vulnerable to COVID-19 are also higher. Researchers point out what we know but don’t always hear enough, which is that race is a social construct, not biological. Meaning, Black and Hispanic Americans aren’t more likely to get infected with COVID because they’re biologically different than White Americans, they’re more likely to be infected with COVID because of socioeconomic factors that are detrimental to their health.

The second story exposes that many people in the President’s inner circle had access to and received highly rationed therapies for COVID-19. I do not take issue with the President receiving such treatment; he is, after all, the President. But Rudy Giuliani admitted he received the treatment he did because, in his own words, he’s a celebrity. “I think if it wasn’t me, I wouldn’t have been put in the hospital. Sometimes when you’re a celebrity, they’re worried if something

happens to you; they're going to examine it more carefully and do everything right." Do celebrities like Giuliani, or Kanye West or Tom Hanks or Taylor Swift or Oprah Winfrey deserve better treatment than the average American does?

The pandemic has exposed who and what we value as a nation. I am able to work from home because of the nature of my work. People who work mostly with their hands aren't as fortunate, leaving them more exposed to COVID. And the economic impact of the pandemic has hit those people much harder. Is my work more valuable than their work? No. But our culture awards me perks that it doesn't others. Of the top 10 occupations hit hardest by the pandemic, 7 of them work with their hands.

If we are indeed seeing the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel with the introduction of a vaccine, it's time we start asking ourselves, who are we as a nation? Who are we as individuals? And what and who do we value?

Who are we, really? When no one is watching; when you've let your guard down; when it's only you and God, hidden away from the world, who are you?

On this third Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading gives us John confronting this very question at the start of his public ministry. He has barely taken up his post at the banks of the Jordan River when his interrogators — priests and Levites from Jerusalem — show up to classify and contain him. Who is this wild, disheveled preacher calling people to repentance? Who granted him this authority? Is he crazy? Is he a threat? Is he — dare they entertain the possibility? — an actual messenger from God?

What's interesting, and refreshing, about John's answers to these questions is that he responds by stating emphatically who he is not. He has zero interest in being a celebrity. He's there for one reason, and one reason only, to point to Jesus and testify to who Jesus is.

I find that refreshing, because we live in an age of celebrity where people are encouraged and awarded for their self-aggrandizement. Cheered on by social media, we are living during a distinctly ego-centric, if not full-on narcissistic, time in our culture. But here is John saying no, I am not Jesus. I am not your Savior. I am not infallible. I am not omniscient. John begins his ministry from a place of humility. He doesn't allow his calling to go to his head. He doesn't claim any

identity that doesn't belong to him. He makes his listeners no promises of ease and comfort; he simply asks them to prepare themselves for the One who is greater than himself. "I am not the Messiah," he says. He stays in his lane. Celebrity holds no attractions for him, and neither does religious or political power.

So who is John? In the 4th Gospel, John is a witness. He's not John the Baptist as he is in Matthew, nor is he John the baptizer, as he is in Mark. He's not even the son of Zechariah, as he is in Luke. He's just John, and when pressed by the authorities to say something about himself, he doesn't even use his own words. He uses the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice" that testifies to the Word made flesh, and the Light that no darkness has or will ever extinguish. In other words, "John's role is to recognize the true light when it appears, and to call attention to it so that others may recognize and believe it." He's not there to compete with the Word of God, nor to be the Light of the World. John's role in life is to be exactly who God wants him to be, which is a witness who points to Jesus.

And this is our calling, too. To point to Jesus and give witness to him. Not to be Jesus; not to be a savior; not to be infallible or omniscient. But to point to the One who is the Word made Flesh and testify to the Light of the World. To witness to what we have seen and heard, and attest to that truth. That's the good news. We don't need to be anything more than that.

Yet the strange, troubling, and perhaps even disturbing thing about being a witness and giving testimony, is that doing so reveals our own truth. Our testimony exposes our own leanings, biases, passions, needs and beliefs. We've seen a lot of witnesses lately and courtroom sagas play out, haven't we? And each scene exposes what the witnesses choose to see, or what they choose to ignore. When we give witness to the external, we also expose the internal – what we value, who we value, who we are, who we have chosen to be, to whom we have committed ourselves, and on what we're willing to stake our lives, and our truth.

What is your witness? Who are you? To whom or what are you pointing? These are important questions. People's lives depend on their answers.

The pandemic has exposed who and what we value as a nation. Are we OK with this? Would John be OK with it? More importantly, would Jesus be OK with it?

“Who are you?” is a very large question. It asks us to do deep work. It asks us to interrogate what we hold dear, what we trust, what we love — and why. What positive, vibrant, living core will we offer to the world in the name of Jesus?

When everyone around John was willing and eager to reward him with their attention, affirmation, and approval if he’d just conformed to their expectations -- I mean, think of all the “likes,” retweets, new followers he’d have gotten if he’d just been who they wanted him to be! – he instead asserted who he was not, and pointed to the One who is the Light of the World.

Today is Joy Sunday, and this feels right to me given our Gospel story, because we tap into joy when we rightly understand who we are in the kingdom and economy of God. New life and fresh joy well up when we align our self-understanding to God’s calling, and recognize that we, like John, are meant to point away from ourselves, and towards Jesus. Joy surprises us when we decide to forge paths in the wilderness, and when we make way in difficult places for someone greater than ourselves. Joy multiplies when we level oppression, injustice, and suffering, so that all flesh can see God together.

Who are you during this sacred season of preparation? Are you a voice? A witness? A path maker? A wilderness dweller? Whatever your desert looks like, wherever your “Jordan River” is located, who are you in that place? Very soon, the one we’re waiting for this Advent will come, and the question on his lips will demand a whole-hearted response: “Who do you say that I am?” Consider the possibility that these are linked questions. Who you are shapes who he becomes in your life. The self you cultivate and curate is the self who will receive the Christ, and make him known to a world that needs him.

So again: Who are you?

Amen.

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