

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 4, 2022
The Second Sunday of Advent

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministry and School Chaplain*
on
John 1:19-28
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Prepare the Way of the Lord

*Pause a while, pause a while
In the humdrum of the city and behind a cloister wall
In the early morning and when shadows start to fall
See creation bending to the maker of it all
And all we have to do is pause a while. (Gary Ault.1969.)*

I wonder what brings you here this dark, wintry afternoon as bright lights flicker and windows glimmer close by, just seconds away from Saint Thomas Church? Perhaps it is the solemnity and mystery of this purple, Advent season that draws you in? I know for some of you it is Advent, with its beautiful candlelit services, prophetic readings and magnificent music, that is your ‘most wonderful time of the year’.

Perhaps, some of you simply popped into Saint Thomas today, up the steps and through those huge wooden doors, maybe for the very first time. Perhaps you were simply curious, or were seeking a moment’s peace, or to escape the cold, or the very bustle on Fifth Avenue that draws people in like a magnet, from all over the globe. And if that is you, welcome.

Perhaps you came inside today wanting to pause a while, to wait, to watch, to retune your life, your day to be prepared for the things that really matter. Desiring to move away from a cacophony of conversations of what is fake, or genuine, or real. Desiring to engage with an Advent that is no mere prequel to Christmas, and one that does not only involve company, candles, trees, or is like a chocolate-filled calendar that is only a means of opening a door to something temporary, tasty or that’s just for you, rather than opening a door to the needs of the world.

For many such an Advent that exists only in name, misses the point. The point, of ‘the reason for this season’ and that of the one to come, is not being about ourselves but the one who is, who was and is to come. The One for whom doors and hearts were *not* open, and yet the same One was born on earth to open his heart to us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

In his weekly meditation to Episcopal Schools the Rev. David A. Madison, *Executive Director of NAES* said, *"We need to make sure we are "keeping the main thing, the main thing.....while it can be hard to act counter-culturally and push back against the frantic pace that the world expects us to keep during the holidays. Rather, let's pause and reflect upon a hope that refuses to die regardless of what we may be facing today. Don't let the busyness of the month crowd out the hope that sustained our ancestors, and will continue to sustain us for ages to come."*

Theologian N.T. Wright explains it [this way](#), *"In Advent, we think our way back to the ancient people of God, to the call of Abraham and his family as the start of God's rescue operation for a world in ruins and a human race in chaos. We follow the story of Israel's hope, a hope that refused to die no matter what terrible things happened; a hope that the first Christians believed had become human in the baby Jesus."*

So, I wonder as we have entered this second week in Advent, what this season means to you, this year?

Is it like those singular Advent candles, with carefully spaced numbers, that are lit each day of December, only to be extinguished on Christmas Day? Does Advent seem no more than a check list or countdown, rather than a count up, or anticipation of and looking beyond the day of incarnation? Or rather do we simply find the annual revisiting of Advent themes akin to lyrical turning circles, spirals and the passage of time, in the Windmills of Your Mind? Or this year do we seek to be recharged by the light that transformed the world, the light we too see symbolized above us in this in this huge wreath, this growing light which each week shines and shares, hope, peace, joy, and love, and ultimately prompts us to turn to, and also be the light of Christ?

The very light, the Christ, for whom John the Baptist a most significant theological figure in the Gospels, came to prepare the way, and in so doing ended nearly four hundred years of prophetic silence. A pivotal figure in the salvation history of God and who in the spirit of Elijah, as we have been reminded today, preached a message of repentance, and baptism. A man who on the banks of the Jordan called others into life, and to walk in the light the Lord.

A man whose birth, like Jesus, was meticulously recorded in scripture, with an entrance into the world marked by angelic proclamation and divine intervention.

A birth that too echoed the momentous occasion of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. As many of you know preparing for a long-awaited baby's arrival, or for becoming a new family, certainly doesn't happen overnight, and for Elizabeth and Zechariah, the unexpected couple, there is a sense that the preparations to welcome John into their lives began long before his conception. In the dreams, visions and hopes for the family, for this child, John unbeknown to them, would become radical and unconventional in unexpected ways, and at every level, including in his very appearance.

At this time of year as the Grade 8 Choir School students prepare for their applications for High School, and Faculty are asked write their recommendations, I wonder what would be said of John the Baptist if he too were an applicant for High School? Indeed, I wonder if he would have qualified for yesterday's Diocesan election for the next Bishop of New York? An outrageous, outspoken outcast, may well be some of the assumptions made about John, by those who did not want to hear God's prophetic message in their hearts, and in their lives.

And yet if this question was asked about the characteristics John's faith, his list or recommendation would be quite different: One who knows what it is to repent to forgive, and be

forgiven, to give voice to his need of God, to pause and prepare, to have his heart and eyes open to the needs of others in the midst of the bustle beside the Jordan River, and in the stillness of the wilderness.

In the humdrum of this city and the quietness of this place, what might be the characteristics of our faith, as we both pause and prepare the way of the Lord, this Advent?

I conclude with a reflection on John whose grace filled witness lifts others to the light, that their doors and their hearts be open to Christ's redeeming love. Might we do the same.

John the Baptist by [Philip C. Kolin](#) (2021)

Out of the wilderness came this prophet of fire
and repentance, his voice a flame igniting
souls out of darkness to witness the Messiah.
Wherever he went bonfires reddened the night air.
He wore a tunic of camel hair, and a rope
cincture binding unruly flesh from
appetite; he lived on locusts and burr-
nested cones. When he entered the Jordan
it flowed east, away from the sin-crust west.
Each wave was engraved with grace as he plunged
sinners heavy with the world's woes under
only to lift them up toward the light.
But not the Pharisees. Stones would rise sooner.
When he announced Christ passing by,
the birds of the air carried each honeyed syllable
to every open heart and sin-ridden soul.