

Advent III, December 17, 2017 St. Augustine in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

May 1st, 1993: The day Rachel and I got married! It was both a traditional and an unusual service. On the one hand we used the marriage service from the Book of Common Prayer. On the other hand we included liturgical dance in the service, and we each had a best man! Who those “best men” were (and are) is even more “interesting!” My best man is a private detective named Don Johnson - yes, really his name is Don Johnson - not to be confused with the “Don Johnson” who played a detective in the 1980's TV show in “Miami Vice”! Of course, this caused problems for him because no one believed his name was really Don Johnson! Another fun fact about our wedding: we used Don’s surveillance equipment to film the service!

Rachel’s best man - Casey Carle - is a college friend and former Barham and Bailey circus clown - his wife Kandie is a former dancer with the circus who was an “elephant presenter” – the lights would go down, the spotlights come up, and in would come the elephants with women in costume leading them. When I asked her how you present elephants, she showed me: “like this” she said.

And now you’ve met John the Baptist. He was a “presenter. And the “elephant” in the gospel story’s current room? That would be Jesus. Now the spotlights focus on Jesus, and John exits stage left, his work done; he’s made room for and announced the real hero of our story.

In the 4th Gospel’s language it’s not elephants but light – The Light, in fact the True Light, in fact the True Light in the Darkness! It’s no small thing to bear witness to the light when everything seems dark.

That metaphor – God/Jesus as Light – is what the “O Antiphon” for what is verse 6 of “O come, O come Emmanuel” focuses on: **O come, O *Bright and Morning Star*, and bring us comfort from afar! Dispel the shadows of the night and turn our darkness into light.** It’s clearly based on a passage in the Book of Revelation (22:66), which refers to Jesus as the “bright morning star.” Why did the hymn’s author chose that particular metaphor?

The Ancients used that title – “The Morning Star” – to describe something they thought was a star, which they also called “*Phosphoros*”: “*the bringer of light.*” What they were looking at was actually the planet Venus, which rises in the east between two hours and a few minutes before sun-rise. The Morning Star heralds the coming of the Sun, of sun-rise.

Jesus the Morning Star – the Resurrected One – heralds the coming of a new heaven and a new earth, promises the transformation of all that is for good, and does so as certainly as the sun rises each day.

On any long dark night – as long as its clear! – you know that the appearance of the morning star means daybreak is imminent, light is returning. In the long dark night of struggle and suffering on earth, Jesus the morning star promises eternity’s dawn.

The Light that is Jesus is a light that finds its way into the unlikeliest places—it's a light that brings healing and release, a light that visits us with joy when we cannot imagine it, a light that meets each hunger, a light that invades and transforms the deepest shadows.

This is a time of year which offers us that vision of hope and possibility.

It's also a reminder of an important ministry that we who so loudly proclaim the importance of fellowship and community can overlook. In the midst of the celebrations there are who live alone – who are no longer or perhaps have never been the most important person in the life of someone else. Our ministry is to carry the promise of God's light to them – to be Light-Bearers. So this verse challenges us as much as it can comfort us.

The next – the last – “O Antiphon” – uses the language of Kingship: **O come, O *King of nations*, bind in one the hearts of humankind. Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our *King of Peace*.**

This is not the kingship that humanity is most familiar with! When that word – “King” – and its relative – “Kingdom” – is used about Jesus and God in the New Testament it means something different than our 21st Century understanding. It was, for the New Testament writers, most often used to make a contrast with the way words like “king” and “kingdom” were already understood and used in the 1st Century world of the Roman Empire. Along with other “contrast” words, like “Lord,” or “Savior,” the intent was make a claim: Jesus is Lord, not Caesar; Jesus is the Savior, not Caesar; Jesus is King and Emperor, not Caesar. Today, an appropriate contrast would be “Jesus is Commander-in-Chief, not the President.”

There's real power, therefore, to using the language of kingship here: singing it means we're accepting that Jesus is our king, our Commander-in-Chief. That, too, both holds out a promise and brings a challenge. Our King, our Commander-in-Chief – Jesus, is not a king or Commander-in-Chief who rules with indifference, violence and death, but one who invokes, promotes, offers, and brings peace. Which one will you choose?

Light and Peace; hope and promise; the birth of possibility, the power of God to work in what seem like powerless places – and the challenges as well as the blessings they offer to us – those themes echo through this weeks readings.

The Isaiah reading is underpinned by all those things! Isaiah sings of this power that enables him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. The kings of the outside world can't – won't – do that!

And Paul's words – the first Christian words written down in the New Testament – testify to the God who calls us to ***Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances***, even (and perhaps especially) when the circumstances hardly seem to warrant it, when we find ourselves in the deep darkneses of our lives.

In this final week, do that! Rejoice, pray, give thanks, for “[w]hat has come into being...[is] life,

and the life [is] the light of all people. [This] light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [can]not overcome it.”

In this Advent week, may we bear this light for one another, and may Christ our Light go with us and illumine our way