

John 1:6-8, 19-28 December 13, 2020 Pastor Steve Brackett—NEIA Synod Advent 3

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and from the Holy Spirit who is poured out upon us. Amen. I am Pastor Steve Brackett, an assistant to Bishop Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl in the Synod Office, and I bring you greetings from Bishop DeGroot-Nesdahl and all the Synod staff as we worship together during this 3rd Week of Advent. May this time of preparation be a blessing for you, and those you love.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.” These words of Paul are words that I needed to hear this week. And they are words that we need to take to heart as we all continue to come to grips with the devastation that this pandemic has unleashed on the world, and the effect it has had on the people of God, the Christian church, the ELCA, our Synod, and the individual congregations and ministries of our Synod. We shall not soon forget this year that comes approximately 2020 years after the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—a birth that we will celebrate in less than two weeks in a way that is very much different from the way we would traditionally celebrate it. Yes... it is appropriate to be disappointed about this fact for a while. It is appropriate to feel a little scared, and apprehensive about what the future will hold if we cannot even celebrate Christmas in a “normal” way. But it is also appropriate, as we prepare in this season of Advent to once again celebrate the birth of Jesus, that we really listen to these words of Paul in 1st Thessalonians, and the other scripture readings for this week, and take them to heart.

We can rejoice. We can pray without ceasing. We can give thanks in all circumstances—even now! Especially now! Then Paul says, “Do not quench the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit has been at work, the Holy Spirit is at work in this Synod, giving spiritual gifts to people, strengthening faith, and directing our work—giving us the strength and the will to fight

this pandemic in any way that we can. Sometimes the Spirit leads exactly where we are hoping to go. Sometimes the Spirit leads in a direction that we were not planning to go. I know that for my wife Susan and me, things have turned out best when we have followed the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives, rather than following our own ways. For now, that means doing things very differently than we would like in order to protect ourselves and those around us. Some of us are disappointed about that. And some of us are just plain angry about that.

If you have downloaded and have been studying the ELCA World Hunger Advent Study for 2020 called “God with Us” you have seen the story of Cacilda [ka-SEAL-dah] Rodrigues. Her mother raised 11 children alone, until she died at age 50. Cacilda was 22 at the time. The people of her community supported Cacilda and her siblings in their time of need. “Now 63, Cacilda has dedicated years to giving back through volunteering.” This has helped her to work through the anger she felt at the loss of her mother. By giving to others in ways that helped them to become self-sufficient, Cacilda “grew and improved.” She came to realize that she is “the one who gains the most” as she helps others to cope with challenges and difficulties in their lives.

Our Advent Study for this week goes on to say, “As common — and often justified — as anger is, it is one of those emotions that we struggle to deal with in the church, at times. We might find it difficult to place raw, tumultuous emotions within the life of the people of God.... Volatile emotions, particularly in the seasons of Advent and Christmas, feel so out of place. We aren’t quite sure what to do with them.”

“That has made 2020 particularly hard to navigate. This year, we have lived with the grief of the hundreds of thousands of lives lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have mourned isolation from one another and the loss of that most basic human need of touch, even as we understood the risk that accompanied handshakes and hugs. We grieved together as loved ones

and neighbors died alone in hospitals or nursing homes. And when we couldn't gather together for funerals, we lost a key ritual for processing our grief as a community.”

In last Sunday's Gospel we were introduced to John the Baptist. Today that introduction continues, and we get another perspective on his life and his work. John the Evangelist, the writer of this Gospel, tells us that there is another John, a man sent from God. This John comes as a witness to the Light so that all people encountering the Light might believe through him. The Evangelist reminds us that John the Baptist is not the Light, he testified to the Light. The authorities in Jerusalem must have wondered who John thought he was, so that is likely why they sent priests and Levites to ask him. Replying honestly, John states that he is not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet (someone who was expected to come who would be like Moses).

This is where our own expectations in these weeks relate to the expectations in this Gospel. Remember that the Jewish people, while living in their own country, were under the domination of the Roman Empire. They had the freedom to be Jewish, but it was limited and shaped by the Roman authorities, including the Roman soldiers that occupied their lands. When the questioners bring up these three significant names from the Old Testament, they do it because they are expecting someone from the Lord God who will free them from this Roman domination.

The problem with their expectations is that they were looking at things from a purely human perspective. So, in their minds, the Messiah, the Anointed One, was going to be strong in the way that the world understands strength. The Messiah would free God's people from the world's domination. They believed that Elijah, who had gone to heaven alive in a chariot and who dressed like John the Baptist, was going to come back before the Messiah appeared. The prophet-like-Moses was a mysterious figure who was going to re-establish with full force the old kingdom of Israel, and the solid relationship between God and God's chosen people.

After stating that he is not one of these three Old Testament people, John (quoting from Isaiah) states that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, a voice that calls for the way of the Lord to be made straight. The Jewish authorities want to know why he is baptizing if he is not the Messiah or Elijah or the prophet-like-Moses. John replies that while he baptizes with water there is One in their midst whom they do not know, the One who is coming after him, the One whose sandal thong John is not worthy to untie.

An important shift happens here with John's testimony. Instead of proclaiming that God is sending someone to again rescue the people of God from their bondage, John is proclaiming that God is coming to save the people. John is preparing the way for God to act directly. His baptizing and preaching in the desert is opening up the hearts of the world's people, leveling their pride, filling their emptiness, and preparing them for God to step into the world's life.

This passage still makes its way into our lives today. So many of our expectations for this life reflect both pride and emptiness—especially during this time of pandemic. These false expectations that we have, given to us by the world, must be challenged and set aside. Otherwise they will block us from seeing the Lord God step into this life through our celebration of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ December 25th. In the end, we all will be fine—because we have a Savior who is here among us to embrace us, to bring us comfort, to surround us with God's love, and to assure us with the promise that God is with us in this life and the next.

Let us pray... Comforting and empowering God, you meet us amid our pain and ease the load of our burdens. Be near us in our grief and anger, comfort us as we mourn and move our will toward acts of justice for one another. Grant the world just peace this season, that we may find rest and hope in you. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.