

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Rebecca Boardman



Rebecca is an active member of the Church of England and currently works for the Anglican mission agency USPG (United Society Partners in the Gospel) as their Regional Manager for church relationships in East Asia, Oceania and Europe. Prior to serving at USPG she worked as Refugee Response Facilitator for St Paul's Anglican Church, Athens, Greece in the Church of England's Diocese in Europe and spent a year living with the Episcopal Church in the Philippines under USPG's short-term mission placement programme *Journey with Us*. Rebecca has a Bachelor's degree in Geography from the University of Cambridge and is currently studying for an MA in Religion in Global Politics at SOAS, University of London. In her free time Rebecca enjoys being "quintessentially British" and sees no better way to spend the day than a walk in the countryside followed by watching the 'Great British Bake Off' with a good old cup of tea!

GOSPEL—JOHN 1: 6-8, 19-28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

REFLECTION

It has only been quite recently that I have come to appreciate the gift of the season of advent. As a child advent was brushed over. December was simply an extended Christmas – a month of activities and parties with those who I wouldn't be spending Christmas day with. At best advent was a countdown until the real fun of the Christmas holidays could begin.

It wasn't until I spent a year with the Episcopal Church in the Philippines that I was introduced to the stillness, peace and hope that came with first observing the season of advent. In waiting for the 25th of December to celebrate Christmas, advent became for me what it was intended to be: a



time for reflection in a period of darkness; a season of expectation, of hope and of promise. This is a lesson and a practice that I have carried with me since then.

So as I sit here in London in Autumn 2020, in the midst of a global climate and ecological crisis, embedded in systems of oppression and racial injustice and as I watch as the UK's national cases of COVID19 rise once again, not for the first time this year have I felt that possibly the darkness is too much and that maybe we need the solace, comfort and hope of the season of advent now more than ever!

And so it is in that spirit that we approach this week's reading. A very familiar passage that speaks to being a witness to light in the darkness and a to being a voice in the wilderness crying 'make straight the ways of the Lord' and so in my reflection today I ask what does this mean for us in our own contexts of darkness or wilderness? And what can we learn from John as we, like him, follow God's sending to be witnesses to Christ in our own communities?

John is a remarkable individual representing both the last of the prophets but also the first of the evangelists. In our passage we hear that John was 'sent by God'. John was indeed a missionary sent by God to point others to Jesus; to prepare the way for others to encounter Jesus. It is from John's example we are also able to model our response to the mission that God has for our lives. One that is done in a spirit of humility, faithfulness and self-sacrifice. It was never about John it was always about Jesus. In the same way it is never about us, it is always about Jesus. Even as the crowds grew and John gained notoriety and status he continues to assert that he is not the Messiah or a prophet, instead subordinating himself to Jesus the true light of the World.

As I have said it feels to me as though we are in a period of incredible darkness characterised by uncertainty and fear. This past year has not been what any of us expected and yet it is within this context that God has sent his people – us - to be witnesses to the light. Over the past 9 months we have seen this as Churches across our Anglican Communion step up to provide hope and acts of loving service in spite of the challenges that COVID19 has brought on our own communities.

To mention but a few, we see this in the response of the Diocese of Niassa in Mozambique who have carried out an awareness raising campaign in their communities teaching hygiene and practical ways to prevent the spread of COVID19. We see this in the Diocese of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands who have distributed food packages to elderly and homebound people across Jamaica. We see this in the members of St Barnabus Church in Walthamstow here in London who have phoned up individuals in their congregation who do not have access to the internet to ensure that they remain connected to their spiritual community whilst being confined to their homes. We continue to see acts of faithfulness, humility and self-sacrifice in spite of the many challenges that we each face.

The light shines in the darkness. God's light shines in our darkness. And so this advent how so we point people to the hope and light of Christ? How can we be vessels of expectation, promise and hope?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we best appreciate the gift of the season of advent this year? What practices can we personally commit to in order to best use this opportunity for reflection?
2. Where in our own communities can we see God's light in the darkness?
3. In what ways do our mission initiatives and witness point to Jesus, and in what ways do they point to us? How can we better 'testify to the light'?
4. How can we apply such a familiar passage in a new and radical way in our own communities today? Share an idea of how you could apply this afresh this week.

