

# North Kildonan United Church

13<sup>th</sup> December 2020 ~ Rev. Don Johnson

## “A Man Named John”

*Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11*

*I Thessalonians 5: 16-24*

*John 1: 6-8, 19-28*

*God of eternity, when the voice of the prophet was silent and the faith of your people low; when darkness had obscured light and indifference displaced zeal: you saw that the time was right and prepared to send your Son. Set us free from fear and faithlessness that we may be ready to welcome him who comes as Saviour and Lord. Amen.*

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)*

Each of the gospel writers tells the good news of Jesus Christ in their own particular way. For John, his opening words echo the story of Creation: *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth"* is how Genesis, chapter one, verse one begins. For John, Jesus, the Son of God, is the Word eternally found with the Father, the Word who took flesh and lived as a human being in a world of human beings, God fully embracing humanity. There is no gradual discovery of who this Jesus is as we might find in the other gospels—John is clear that Jesus is both human and divine.

For John, there is no manger or shepherds or wise men or stars in the sky. This gospel begins with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. We found a similar approach last Sunday in Mark's gospel. *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Which was immediately followed by Mark's account of John the Baptizer preparing the way. No baby held by his mother, no cattle lowing, no angelic choruses, no silent night.

Certainly for Mark, the absence of any nativity references is quite intentional. As we read our way through Mark this year, we will encounter a gospel writer bursting to share the good news. A reoccurring word will be "immediately", and that is because the story of Jesus Christ is too exciting, too valuable, too life changing to get slowed down by details such as a census requiring a young couple to go back to their home town, or even accounts of angels making proclamations and reluctant fathers dreaming dreams. For Mark, in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has come near, and word must be spread, spread quickly, spread immediately.

Fortunately we have two other gospels which help round out the Christ story. And each approach the story from their own angle.

Matthew begins by placing the birth of Jesus within the genealogy of David and Abraham. For 17 full, if not particularly interesting verses, Matthew chronicles this ancestry from Abraham to David, then states that Joseph is a descendant of David. Of course Matthew is making the point that through Joseph, his earthly father, Jesus is the descendant of David, the fulfillment of the promises made to David so many centuries before. According to Matthew, Mary is pregnant but Joseph is not the father. In a dream, an angel tells Joseph that the Holy Spirit has made Mary pregnant and that Joseph is to take Mary as his wife. And so the Christmas story according to Matthew begins.

Luke is our other gospel which provides the Christmas story. This account is clearly set in the time of King Herod, and begins with angelic visits, culminating in Mary's great song of praise and joy, which begins: *"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour."* Next Sunday we will hear more from Luke about the role of Mary in the gospel.

But back to our reading from John. The first human mentioned in this gospel is John the Baptist. Just to be clear, John the Baptist is not John the writer of today's gospel. And quite possibly there was no single author of today's gospel. It's often referred to as the Fourth Gospel as well as the gospel according to John, and that's because many believe that this gospel was the work of a number of people, of a community actually. Today is not the day to delve much further into that. We'll save that for another time.

But I will share with you a brief poem about this gospel. Malcolm Guite is a contemporary English poet and Anglican priest, who summarizes the fourth gospel this way:

*"This is the Gospel of the primal light,  
The first beginning, and the fruitful end,  
The soaring glory of an eagle's flight.  
The quiet touch of a beloved friend.  
This is the Gospel of our transformation,  
Water to wine and grain to living bread,  
Blindness to sight and sorrow to elation.  
And Lazarus himself back from the dead!  
This the Gospel of all inner meaning,  
The heart of heaven opened to the earth,  
A gentle friend on Jesus' bosom leaning,  
And Nicodemus offered a new birth.  
No need to search the heavens high above.  
Come close with John, and feel the pulse of Love."*

The Baptist is introduced this way in our Gospel. *"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light..."*

As John goes about calling upon those who would listen to prepare for the coming Messiah, the Christ, he is challenged by the religious authorities. *"Who are you?"* they ask, then they go on, pressing him for a definitive answer, one that they can use against him. He's very clear who he is not, and equally clear that he is the voice in the wilderness, the one baptizing, the one preparing the way of the Lord. Not the saviour, but one who bears witness to the Saviour, the Word made flesh. In a sense, John is the prototype of all preachers, evangelists and clergy, ones who bear witness to the gospel, who testify to the light but are not themselves the light.

John's role is to give advance notice that help is on the way, that hope will come in human form, that the promises made by the prophets of long ago will be fulfilled in Jesus.

We celebrate that hope in human form each year at Christmas, but we also look for hope in other forms as well. The approval of the vaccine just announced in Canada, as well as the beginning of the administration of the vaccine in Britain, are signs of tremendous hope and promise. It is light at the end of a long, dark tunnel, promise that we dared hope for.

Christmas is all about hope, of light shining in the darkness, of the promise of new birth and new life in Jesus Christ. But hope finds its way to us in many forms.

Recently I received the annual seed catalogue from the gardening store I deal with. Other years I didn't pay too much attention to it when it arrived, but this year I've taken it much more seriously. Not that I have a huge garden planned for 2021, but because the catalogue reminds me that better days are ahead, that this winter of pandemic will come to an end, that so much we have to deal with now will, in good time, become a thing of the past. For these many months it was hard to plan for much of anything but now the distant light of hope is beaming brighter and we can dare dream and plan again.

There are still sacrifices to make, and chief amongst those will be our limitations for gathering for Christmas and New Year's. But they are sacrifices worth enduring, knowing that a new day is drawing near.

So we remain hopeful yet careful, respectful of the power of the virus, respectful of the health of those we love and equally respectful of the health of the stranger we meet. As we expectantly look and pray for that new day, we might be wise to consider what we have learned during these months, review what we have experienced and

cherish what and who has meant the most for us. And we pray that day will come soon. I want to end with this.

An ancient Advent tradition are the great O Antiphons. We know them as found in the hymn *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. The second verse, which begins "*O come, O Wisdom from on high*", has been recrafted by Malcolm Guite this way.

*"I cannot think unless I have been thought,  
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken;  
I cannot teach except as I am taught,  
Or break the break except as I am broken.  
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,  
O Light within the light by which I see,  
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,  
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,  
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,  
O Memory of time, reminding me,  
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,  
My Maker's bounding line, defining me:  
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring.  
Come to me now, disguised as everything."*

Stay safe, be careful yet hopeful, knowing that our deliverance from this virus is drawing ever closer. God bless you. Amen.