

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Almighty God, you have poured upon us the light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives as a witness to your love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” And this is his testimony: “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”

No one likes a prophet very much. Prophets are filled with the spirit of selfless delight. They are the first light of creation’s dawning. They are the first hint of the infinite loving of God. Among you stands one whom you do not know — the very lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Rejoice at his appearing.

The problem with prophets is this. They insist on proclaiming infinite joy, selfless joy, redeeming joy, just when we ourselves are in the dark, obsessed by the sorrow of life, so that we can feel no joy because we cannot gaze at the light. Among you stands one whom you do not — cannot know. Only I can see him. I have come to testify to the light. When we are on the night shift, obsessed with the wicked ways of the world, the corruption of politicians in Chicago, the misfortune and fickle ways of the economy, and can see no light at the end of a very long tunnel, and someone comes along and says, “I can see the light. Be happy. Don’t worry. Your salvation is already here,” we get angry, lock the prophet up in prison and lop off his head. That puts an end to mindless optimism. And that is exactly what happened to John. The voice of one crying in the wilderness was silenced. The pain of Roman oppression and the disappointment of religious indifference and the hopelessness of entrenched injustice were so dark that no one wanted to talk about seeing the light.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a voice like John’s in Nazi Germany. He encouraged the Christian community to remain true to the Gospel and to stand against injustice in nonviolence. He bore witness to the light, and he was imprisoned. Shortly before Christmas 1943, he wrote this from his prison cell. “Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits and hopes and patters around, but to no avail. The message of John and of Advent is that the door is indeed shut and locked on the prison of the world, and on my cell, but God is doing something about it.” And then he becomes the voice of the prophet when Bonhoeffer writes, “The rescue mission we eagerly await is already underway. The invasion is happening. The curtain is rising. If we hush our lives long enough in silent stillness we too can experience the invasion of holiness that constitutes our hope and salvation. We can enter into the prophet’s cry. God is offering good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, the year of the Lord’s favor. The ultimate exodus is unfolding. Righteousness and praise will spring up before all the nations.” And then, like John, he was executed in prison, and set free.

In this dark Advent of anxiety and fear, this Advent of disappointment and loss, this Advent of belt-tightening, this Advent of waiting to see how bad things will get, we dare not silence the voice of the prophets who bear witness to the light, the true light which enlightens everyone,

which is coming into the world. Advent invites us to join the prophet's song and sing the chorus. To experience the invasion of holiness that is our hope and our salvation, the one whom we long to know, the one who is already among us, Jesus Christ, our Lord. The more we are told that we are foolish, the more we sing. When we are told to be silent, we testify to the light. When the door is shut and locked behind us, the more we know that our liberation has already begun. Enkindle the light of your incarnate Word in our hearts, O God, and with the prophets, set us free.