

Year B, Advent II
December 10, 2017
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“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:4-5).

The details of today’s reading tell us that the people were actively seeking God. When they could not find God through the Temple in Jerusalem, they went looking for God as presented to them by the prophet John the Baptist. How do we know this? First, the text says plainly they went out to meet John. The second clue is their baptism in the river Jordan.

Part of the ritual of approaching the Temple mount was a ritual bath to purify one’s self to enter the holy grounds of the Temple. It was in the Temple where one could most closely commune with God, but we know that the leadership of the Temple was corrupt. The people knew it too. Although the officially sanctioned religious leaders were authorized to lead the Temple, their moral authority was in question because of their unfaithfulness, because of their cozying up to political power.

This question, “Where does authority lie?” is at the heart of religious transition going on in our country right now. In her book, *The Great Emergence* author Phyllis Tickle raises this very issue. We know that people are distrustful of institutions in general and religious institutions in particular. The “why’s” are many- from people’s rightful suspicions of reading the Bible literally to clergy sexual abuse and cover-ups, there are many reasons why people seek communion with God beyond the church. The principle reason people look beyond the church, however, is rather straight forward- the church does not look enough like Jesus. The gap between the teachings of Jesus and the actions of the church provides people license to look elsewhere.

This morning at our Annual Meeting, in addition to various elections for church leadership, we will be presenting a narrative annual report with a stress on narrative. The story we will tell is one of Christian ministry that takes place through St. Martin’s Episcopal Church. It is a narrative that we as a family of faith need to be reminded of, and it is a story we should be proud to tell to the world. Here is how we are being the hands of Jesus. Here is how we are being the heart of Jesus. Here is how we are being the body of Jesus, both to each other pastorally and to the world through service in the name of Christ.

If someone was to walk into our church on a given day, would we pass the authenticity test? Would we have credibility to proclaim peace in the name of Jesus; the audacity show Christ’s love in the action? I think we do. You will see that in the report we present, but only you can answer that question for yourself as a member of the body. Is my life an authentic representation of the teachings and ministry of Jesus that have been entrusted to me?

Sometimes I hear from people what it is that we are lacking as a church- that we are lacking twenty people or so to round out our numbers or that we need more money or whatever you believe to be the silver bullet to make us “successful”. It is true, more people and more money would certainly make life more convenient, but would these items on their own make us a more authentic church, a more credible display of Jesus to people who passed this way? Friends we already are successful because we are doing the work of Jesus. Our angst seems to be more about worldly metrics than heavenly markers.

Take heart- John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Nobody would question the veracity of such rituals. This ritual as offered by John was exceedingly important, but the baptism of Jesus goes one step further than removing our sins; it provides the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Do not for one moment underestimate the meaning and power of this gift. That gift, that ember still in some and burns in others. Perhaps all we need now is a gentle reminder that we already have everything we need to be the church of Jesus, the Body of Christ. *Amen.*