

John 1:6-8, 19-28  
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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Casa Blanca

Have any of you been to the University of Arizona's Art Museum's permanent exhibit of the Altarpiece from Ciudad Rodrigo, Spain? The panels were painted by Fernando and Francisco Gallego and another man known as Maestro Bartolome at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. I went to see it last week. It's a long, long story of how the Altarpiece ended up in the permanent collection of the University of Arizona and I won't tell it to you now. If you have not seen it, please go. The paintings, in what is called Hispano-Flemish style, are bright and fresh and quite amazing.

The simplest of all the five-foot tall panels is a painting of the moment Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant, embrace as Mary arrives at the home of her kinswoman. There is nothing fancy in the scene, a dog in the doorway of a simple home on a hillside, with Mary and Elizabeth tenderly embracing just outside the entrance, and both Joseph and Zechariah standing to the side.

I've never thought about Joseph and Zechariah being present at that moment, but there's no reason for them not to have been. The artist back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century placed them there, and I'll always think of them there from now on.

To me the panel stands out because of that simplicity, two women, the one in her old age about to become the mother of John the Baptist, and the younger one, barely a teenager, to become the mother of Jesus.

Two unexpected pregnancies, two miraculous births. No wonder Mary, when she learns of Elizabeth's pregnancy, goes to visit her. Elizabeth and Mary shared God's miracles in their lives, and according to the writer of the Gospel of Luke, Elizabeth's baby leaped for joy in her womb when Mary greeted her.

It is only from Luke's Gospel we hear the story that John the Baptist and Jesus are connected even before they were born. It's a great story.

Luke tells us that at John's birth all the women rejoiced at the delivery of a healthy boy and he was presented for the ritual of circumcision eight days later. Everyone presumed he would be named Zechariah after his father, but his mother Elizabeth said "No! Name him John."

Zechariah, you may remember, had been struck mute, as he had not trusted the Angel Gabriel's announcement that he and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age, so he was given a writing tablet so as to be able to state his wishes, as it was the right of the father to name the child. He wrote, "His name is John." That was the name the Angel Gabriel had told him to give the boy.

And those who witnessed this, we are told, reflected, saying, "What will this child grow up to be? For the hand of God is with him."

And the writer of the Gospel of Luke adds, "And the child grew strong in the Spirit, and sojourned in the wilderness until the appointed day."

What else do we know about John the Baptizer? We know he had a successful ministry of his own. Thousands of people were coming out to repent and be baptized by him. We know that many years after the deaths of both John and Jesus several apostles, including the Apostle Paul, met followers of John, as far away as Asia Minor, who, after further instruction were received among the followers of Jesus Christ.

There are independent historical records of John the Baptizer also. The historian Josephus reports that John was executed by Herod's order at a fortress near the Dead Sea.

Marcus Borg suggests that Jesus actually began his ministry as a follower of John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts John is arrested and put in prison just before Jesus' own public ministry begins.

Part of John's message was that descent from Abraham alone was not enough to guarantee salvation. What was necessary was an act of repentance, a confession of sin, and baptism with water. John wasn't founding a new religion, but he was demanding a radical repentance and a new way of living.

John's message swept across Israel like wildfire. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and also the Book of Acts report that "all" went out to hear him, and the historian Josephus comments that he was highly regarded by the whole Hebrew people.

The writers of all four gospels, while having different takes on the role of John's the Baptizer, all see him as the person who stands at the beginning of the Good News of Jesus. About John Jesus himself later said, "There is no one born of woman greater than John." High praise indeed.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John we hear:

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

"This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

As John did not claim to be the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet the priests and Levites asked him a second time: "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, `Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

Going out into the wilderness is a time-honored way of opening ourselves to wait for God, to prepare ourselves for the coming of God into our lives.

I believe wilderness is a place where we often feel the absence of God, *before* we can feel God's presence.

It is only by making ourselves vulnerable that we as individuals can learn to listen to what God wants for our lives. It is only by making ourselves vulnerable that we can, as a community, listen to God's call to us. Let us remember that it is in the wilderness that God encounters God's chosen people. It is in the wilderness that God reaches out to us.

Our task during this Advent is to acknowledge and name this wilderness we find ourselves in and then take the time we need to prepare for Jesus' coming, to open our hearts and minds and

souls to him, to prepare ourselves for that new thing which is to come.

Two weeks ago on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, I preached about us here at St. Andrew's feeling like we are in limbo, waiting to hear from Bishop Smith his decision regarding the recommendations of next steps for us here at St. Andrew's.

But it is possible to get stuck in limbo isn't it? And that's not where we want to be, is it? But we can learn from a sojourn in the wilderness, can we not?

I feel we at St. Andrew's, long term members and newer members, laity and clergy, are being called to leave behind old ways of thinking and acting, to leave the negative voices behind, and to look ahead to a future which has not yet completely unveiled itself to us.

We are being called into new birth as a congregation, new ways of thinking and acting as individuals and as a community. We don't quite know what that looks like at the moment, but we can wait knowing God promises us a new future, we can wait for the new birth which will come, we can wait along with Elizabeth and Mary during this season of Advent.

Let us ask ourselves the question "What will we grow into being?" In what ways will we grow stronger in the Spirit?

Let us make ourselves open and ready for the new things God will do with us as we make ourselves ready to rejoice anew at Christ's coming as a little child.

Amen.