

"Someone's Coming to Town..."
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Pres, New Canaan, CT – December 17, 2023

PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8, 27-31

I love to drive around at night and look at the Christmas lights in New Canaan. There are massive amounts of lights on the mansions in town, some with two story inflatables of Rudolf, Frosty and Santas out there. One of them is on the corner of our street so I get to see Santa every night as I'm driving home and remember "he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness sake!"

I enjoyed helping with the Exchange Club Senior luncheon at Waveny and it was fun to have Santa show up to greet everyone with a "Ho, ho, ho!" and see the joy on all those young at heart faces as Santa handed out gift bags to all. You can find Santas at shopping malls this Christmas, and there's nothing like watching a young child engage with a really good Santa. Santa is so popular, of course, because he's the guy who will bring you what you want for Christmas. You whisper your heart's desires in his ear, and magically Christmas morning they will appear...

You have to look more carefully around town to discover a manger scene. You can see the life-size figurines of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus on the grounds of St. Aloysius Church. Santa still dominates, of course, but you will see an occasional Jesus around this time of year.

One whom you will not find, however, is John the Baptist. Though John the Baptist comes each year in Advent, as faithful as any Santa, shepherd or wise man, we do not see him anywhere. There are no booths or nativity scenes with John, clothed with a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist. Yet on the Sundays of Advent, and especially in the readings for today, we hear not the sound of angels singing in the night, but the hoarse voice of "one crying in the wilderness." Normally he only shows up once in the lectionary readings, but this year, we get a double dose of John.

The Gospel according to another John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, describes the Baptist's ministry: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him" (John 1:6-7, RSV). He was not the light, the Gospel underlines, but he came to bear witness to the light. The other Gospels may describe John the Baptist as a strange sounding figure, foraging on locusts and wild honey, but in the Gospel of John, it is not John the Baptist who is the stranger; rather he points to another who is to us a stranger: "I

baptize with water," says John, "but among you stands one whom you do not know" (John 1:26, RSV).

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." He refers, of course, to Jesus. What a curious thing to say! We know Jesus! He's the baby in the manger at the nativity scene! He is the little doll baby that will be so fondly cuddled here next Sunday in the Children's Christmas Pageant.

Our words tell us we know Jesus. He's the Son of God, the Word made flesh. He is "God of God, Light from Light, True God from True God," as the Nicene Creed says it. "Jesus is the reason for the season," the bumper sticker used to proclaim. We know Jesus. We carry him around with us - nothing strange about him. But still the words of John the Baptist haunts us: "Among you stands one whom you do not know. . ."

In W.H. Auden's Christmas oratorio, "For the Time Being," which I like to read this time each year, it is Herod the King, a thoroughly reasonable and ultimately practical man, who prays for a God he can recognize immediately. One who is not in the least extraordinary but someone like himself.

That is precisely the One whom John the Baptist will not "produce." John the Baptist stands there for all time, interrupting our familiar Christmas traditions with the announcement, "Among you stands one whom you do not know." We handle the familiar treasures of Christmas with such casualness that we are apt to forget that the coming of the Messiah, of God's promised one, is always surrounded with challenge and mystery.

Perhaps that's why Santa is such a big success. He just listens to us and smiles and laughs and gives us what we think we want. He's transparent, because he is simply a reflection of our desires.

Now please don't misunderstand me if I sound a little hard on Santa and all of the creches and the pageants. It is good to have the enchanting porcelain and carved figures to tell our children the lovely, familiar Christmas story. I would never deny a child the sheer delight of crawling up on Santa's lap to whisper in his ear their gift list... But isn't there a danger of shrinking Christmas to the size of the pretty porcelain figurines and, heaven forbid, shrinking down Christmas to an inflatable Santa in the yard?

Surely we do not want to reduce the One who is coming, the very real Christ into something we can grasp and hold and manage? The angels should remind us how

really strange this story is. They appear, singing in the dark, to usher us forever into the presence of someone vast and mysterious.

Jesus is so very different than our refined notions or doctrines of him may be. He is the Living Word, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. And although we know that he is present to us and loves us as we are, he is the One who calls us forth to new and yet undiscovered life. His grace and love is a great mystery to us because it is so unlike ourselves to love the way he loves us.

If we know Jesus at all, we know him as One who is much greater than our personal images of him, for he is God. We know that he is a mystery. He is among us and yet far, far, beyond us. We know Jesus, and because we know Jesus, *we know we don't know Jesus*. The songs we sing express not only our tenderness but also our longing for his coming into our lives anew: "Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is coming near..." or Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates, behold the King of glory waits; the king of kings is drawing near; the savior of the world is here..."

John the Baptist forces our attention to the awesome mystery of Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, yet also God's Son: "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

And isn't this what we really hope for in these weeks before Christmas? Beyond all the reasonable hopes and fears of all the years, we hope deep down that indeed Jesus, the One who has come as a little baby, is also more than that? Isn't our greatest fear at this time of the year the fear that Christmas is nothing more than what we make for ourselves? We lug it up from the basement and decorate the trees and arrange the figures and ornaments and then stow it all back again. Don't we hope that in the midst of it all that through what is familiar and known we might be invaded by wonder and mystery yet unknown? Something new?

John the Baptist's announcement is disturbing - but is also glad tidings of great joy: among all that is so familiar there is more, vastly more. In the very midst of all that is so blessedly familiar - the violence and wars and partisan politics, the epidemic of depression and loneliness on the front-page news every day - there is a blessing greater yet, one that we do not know and have not yet imagined.

The fact that there is more... is true in any relationship - no matter how well you think you know somebody, there's always something yet to learn.

As I said earlier, it was a joy for Kim and me to see you all enjoying simply being together, and to hear of friendships renewed and new friendships forming. You've

heard me say that after coming to New Canaan I feel like such an underachiever. How could I have wasted so much of my life! You all are the most interesting and accomplished people! And I'm sure those of you who are having children home for the holidays will hear about new adventures from school, or stories of their own families. Each new experience shapes and molds us into richer, fuller human beings, and each time we come together, we discover something new about one another - a joy or sorrow to be shared, a story to be told. I had fun yesterday at the Special Church Christmas theater in Norwalk. About 50 Special Needs folks took the stage and sang songs and danced. My favorite was Ted Nougent's "Walk This Way." Each of the cast took a stroll across the stage. Seeing these broken but beautiful people strutting their stuff across the stage, some almost stumbling, a couple in wheelchairs... cheered along by their friends, was deeply moving to me.

John tells us Jesus comes among us as a stranger, but as we live our lives together in his light, when we seek to know him more, we learn that he is One who we can come to know in the most personal way as Lord and Savior, yes, but also as friend.

In our struggles and pain, we discover the companionship of One whom we did not know and had not expected. He finds us when we think we are lost, forgives us when we cannot even forgive ourselves; comes to us when we think we are all alone. He calls us to new life when we feel like giving up the one we have. Jesus comes into our ordinary lives in extraordinary ways, in the smile of a friend, in the kindness of a stranger, in a card that reminds you that you are remembered and loved, in a strange dance that reminds you God loves you with all your imperfections. He is *Emmanuel*.

So on this Third Sunday of Advent, we wait and hope and light candles, looking for him to come among us. So go out and enjoy all of the beautiful decorations and parties and shopping and gift giving and all that is so much a part of our traditional Christmas preparations and celebrations. Catch Santa under the mistletoe if you can. But know that there is One waiting to come into your life, into this church, into this town in a way we have never known before. Yes, someone is coming to town... but he's not checking any lists to see who's naughty or nice. He meets us where we really are and embraces us anew, full of mystery and wonder, full of challenge and command, full of forgiveness and love, full of grace and truth.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.