

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light three candles on your Advent wreath. Pray together the first five verses of John's gospel (John 1.1-5).

**LEADER:** In the beginning was the Word.

**ALL:** The Word was with God.

**LEADER:** And the Word was God.

**ALL:** The Word was in the beginning with God.

**LEADER:** All things came into being through the Word.

**ALL:** Without the Word not one single thing came into being.

**LEADER:** What has come into being in the Word was life.

**ALL:** And the life was the light of all people.

During an adult education hour, a man praised our parish for giving him voice and the Second Vatican Council for recognizing the Church is its people. The man valued having a circle in which he could share insights about the gospel. He could speak for himself, one among a circle of equals.

Giving voice to one's thoughts takes courage even in small groups. Our words reveal who we are. Speaking risks judgment and

# SUNDAY

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misunderstanding. But others' attentive listening helps us find words, ask silly questions, and express feelings we think only we have. Friendships and belonging start this way.

In history prophetic voices stand out and echo in our minds: John Kennedy's, "Ask not what your country can do for you..." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ringing "I Have a Dream" speech. The sound, rhythm, and message of their voices resound in our ears.

In his Nobel lecture Bob Dylan recalls voices that found a home in his ear. He traveled a hundred miles to hear his idol Buddy Holly play just two days before Holly died in a plane crash. Then someone gave Dylan a record that changed his life, a recording he listened to a hundred times—12-string guitarist Lead Belly singing "Cotton Fields." "It transported

me into a world I never knew," Dylan says. He set out learning the vernacular of people's real lives in folk music.

In his lecture Dylan also names three literary classics from grammar school that inspired his songs. He describes the journeys in *Moby Dick* and the *Odyssey* and the senselessness of war in *All Is Quiet on the Western Front*.

Sunday's gospel features the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, a man sent from God to give witness to the light. His voice echoes the prophet Isaiah, who more than 500 years earlier was "a voice crying out in the desert" that God was about to lead captive Israelites home.

● Whose voices in history or in your life echo in your mind? What is their message?



# GOSPEL

**I am not the messiah;  
I am a voice.**

**NARRATOR 1:** 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.

**NARRATOR 2:** This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him:

**PRIESTS, LEVITES:** Who are you?

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** I am not the Messiah.

**PRIESTS, LEVITES:** What then? Are you Elijah?

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** I am not.

**PRIESTS, LEVITES:** Are you the prophet?

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** No.

**PRIESTS, LEVITES:** Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

**NARRATOR:** John answered by quoting the prophet Isaiah.

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Holy One."

**NARRATOR:** Now the questioners had been sent from the Pharisees.

**PRIESTS, LEVITES:** Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

**NARRATOR:** This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.



John 1.6-8, 19-28

was with God from the beginning. The image of the Word grows out of the Old Testament wisdom books, written in the last centuries before Jesus. These writings emphasize God as Creator and personify Wisdom as a partner with God in making the world.

The wisdom and knowledge we humans acquire as conscious

beings can reveal God to us. Wisdom is "a reflection of eternal life, a spotless mirror of the working of God" (Wisdom 7.26).

John's gospel begins with 18 verses about the pre-existent Word who become flesh in Jesus. These verses include the three about John the Baptist that begin Sunday's gospel.

The Baptist is a man sent from God as a witness to testify to the light. His witness has the same purpose as the whole gospel—that all might believe in Jesus through him.

The Baptist is a witness to the existence we may take for granted, the light that rises with the sun each morning, the air we breathe. To testify to the light is to raise people's consciousness that the life and light in which we live reveals God and is God's gift.

Like the people of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness, the Baptist must have learned God's nearness in the silence and solitude of the wilderness where he lives.

## John the Baptist testifies to the light.

Each of the four gospels proclaims who Jesus is in its own way. Each gospel makes John the Baptist significant to how Jesus' story begins.

Last Sunday, Mark's gospel proclaimed Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus is the messiah that Israel's prophets promised God would send.

John the Baptist becomes the last in this line of prophets, a voice calling people to turn toward God.

John's gospel begins before history, before anything exists, in God's realm. The verses that precede Sunday's gospel passage form the prayer on the cover (John 1.1-5). These verses describe the Word who

His preaching opens people to God's presence in Jesus, in whom Wisdom, the Word, has come into the world and become one of us.

● Describe a time of solitude you have experienced.

Why is John the Baptist and his witness so essential to Jesus' story? First, the Baptist gathers a company of followers eager to recognize God's presence with them. Jesus begins his ministry among these openhearted folks.

Second, the Baptist speaks as a prophet in continuity with the prophets in Israel's history. In fact, Christian tradition hears in the preaching of John the Baptist an echo of the voice that called captive Israel home from exile.

Third, the Baptist functions in John's gospel as a legal witness. Priests and Levites interrogate him in Sunday's gospel. His preaching has stirred interest. People from all over Judea are coming to hear his message. His questioners want to know if he is the one who fulfills God's promises to Israel.



This dialogue suggests the richly varied ways in which people imagined the messiah and events they thought would precede the messiah's coming. The prophet Malachi expected Elijah, who was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot, would return as the herald of the messiah (3.1,23). In Deuteronomy 18.15-22, God promises to raise up other prophets like Moses and put words in their mouths.

John the Baptist insists he is neither Elijah nor Moses but a voice crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Holy One." His role, like Second Isaiah's, is to testify God will come to revive and forgive us.

● Whose voices today help renew and revive you?

● Whose voices today help renew and revive the Christian Church?

John anticipates one greater than he is coming. He insists that "Among

you stands one you do not recognize." The words come down the centuries to haunt and taunt us into recognizing where we see Jesus among us.

Our current political scene has awakened voices that divide us. What if this Christmas season we attempt to listen and learn from voices that differ from us? Can we recognize Christ speaking in their voices and values? Can we listen and learn from those we only know by stereotype?

Ours is the task of recognizing God at work in that hardest of all places to see—in ourselves, in our passion for justice, in the events of our history, in our own unrelenting efforts to hold our families and communities together. We live in an unfinished drama and unfolding mystery that is God's life-giving presence with us.

● What in John the Baptist's message helps you prepare to celebrate Christmas?

● Who can you friend again on Facebook or send a Christmas card and greeting?

## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Find and read or listen to Bob Dylan's Nobel lecture online.
- Between now and New Year's Day bring something or someone new into your life and your family. A new dinner guest for Christmas. A civic event you have been meaning to attend. Music or a play that opens you to new feelings and experiences. Let Christ in.

## The Spirit is upon us.

**T**hird Isaiah, whose writing forms chapters 56-66 of the Book of Isaiah, speaks to those rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple after the exile. He speaks God's compassion and liberation to a broken community. God sends the prophet "to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, to announce a year of favor from God."

A year of favor is a jubilee year, which Leviticus 25 describes as a year when the rich must forgive the debts of the poor and restore land to those who have lost it.

Third Isaiah calls for justice and rejoicing to mark this age of rebuilding. His vision calls us Advent people to usher in *this* year as a year of favor from God through all that we do to bring glad tidings and healing to those in need of joy and wholeness. The Spirit is upon us to be good news to the poor and brokenhearted.

This reading includes the passage Jesus says he fulfills when he reads in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4). In Luke's gospel Jesus is the Spirit-filled liberator of the poor.

## Make justice spring up.

The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me and sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from God, a day of vindication.

I rejoice heartily in the Lord; in my God is the joy of my soul; for God has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with jewels.

As the earth brings forth plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.

Isaiah 61.1-2, 10-11

- What are your clothes of joy?
- Whose broken heart is yours to mend?

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## PRAY

**LEADER:** Let us rejoice always and never cease praying.

**ALL:** Give constant thanks and never stifle the Spirit.

**LEADER:** May we test everything and retain what is good.

**ALL:** Let us walk toward home with those in exile and rebuild with those in ruin.

**LEADER:** Help us heal the brokenhearted among us.

**ALL:** Forgiving God, we want to play our part in the unfinished mystery of creation and salvation. May you preserve us whole and irreproachable until the final coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**HYMN:** O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appears. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.



## Make Your Own Manger Scene

Artist Gertrud Mueller Nelson has drawn a manger scene for you to color and cut out. You can tape the figures around small paper cups to make them stand better. Go to [goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com). Click on Manger Scene on our homepage. You can download the pages and print from your computer. Make the coloring a family and friends project.

