

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: John 3:22-30

***“Believe”***

How do we out-do last week's celebration and well-done Christmas Pageant by the youth of St. Andrew's? What a wonderful job done by Holly and Amy, Alissa – and Cady was right on there too. We had children of all ages with us – and each gave their gift to us and to the Lord in recreating that wonderful event that took place in that little Town of Bethlehem. We are still in anticipation of His return as promised to the Mount of Olives. The first candle was lit – as a sign of Hope. Last week the second purple candle was lit symbolizing love and this week we lit the rose candle – on this Third Sunday of Advent. Those who are more “Anglo-Catholic” would call this ‘Gaudete Sunday.’ Gaudete means ‘rejoice’ and this third candle is a sign of Joy. Some churches will even change the color of the hanging from the purple to a rose color. Next Sunday morning the final purple candle will be lit as a sign of Peace – signifying the end of Advent. Later that evening, at our Christmas celebrations – all four will be lit with a special white candle added in the center – the Christ Candle, symbolizing Christ's arrival and the hope, love, joy and peace that will be complete when He comes again. We will also line the front walk with candles in white bags called ‘luminaries’ – signifying that Christ has come during this blessed time. One of the ministers in town said to me: ‘You are doing three services on Sunday – what are you - Catholic?’ I said yes, but with a little ‘c.’ You cannot close out Advent and just let it drift away – the service needs to be celebrated for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday – lighting the 4<sup>th</sup> candle.

In today's Holy Gospel reading we find followers of John the Baptist, who we know was sent to prepare the way for Jesus (as foretold in Isaiah) – coming to him and act like he should be jealous of what Jesus is doing. They were saying that Jesus is on the other side of the Jordan baptizing – but you're the Baptist! They must have been sure that they chose the right horse in the race – and that John's ministry would be endless – not knowing shortly after this, John would be put in prison and beheaded by Herod. John reassures them that God's plan is going just as He wants – and that Jesus is God's Chosen One – and that John's work is a supporting role – like a “best man at a wedding.” Very few people go to a wedding just to see the ‘best man’ – they come to see the bride and groom – who are being joined forever in the eyes of God. John uses this illustration in a purely Biblical way – since the Messiah was seen in the Old Testament and Jewish traditions as the one who would make Israel His bride – He is the Bridegroom.

I have a question for you: what is the role of the best man at a wedding? He is there to love and support the groom – but there is more. One of the most important roles for the best man – and the maid or matron of honor – is to be a witness to the promises made by the bride and groom. The Merriam-Webster dictionary says this:

1. attestation of a fact or event: testimony
2. one that gives evidence; specifically: one who testifies in a cause or before a judicial tribunal
3. one asked to be present at a transaction so as to be able to testify to its having taken place

4. one who has personal knowledge of something
5. a: something serving as evidence or proof: signing for  
b: public affirmation by word or example of usually religious faith or conviction.

Many times, I will hear one of these wedding ‘witnesses’ say that they are just ‘standing up’ for the bride or groom – lending their support. While that may be true – helping to calm nerves, taking care of last minute details, holding the rings – but legally there is that being present to testify as to what took place - witnessing to the promises made before God and to each other.

These followers of John the Baptist “*and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."* To this John replied, "*A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'*" (John 3:26-28) There is that testifying again. Not only did John testify to them '*I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him'*' but he also declared as a testimony "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'*" (John 1:29-30) Remember that the word Christ is Greek for Messiah – or anointed one of God.

What is troubling to me is that these followers of John the Baptist were all upset about the fact that the man who John testified about was baptizing and even worse that people were going to him! Apparently, they did not get the message that John was giving them – that Jesus is the Lamb of God, and so he makes the connection to the bridegroom to seal the deal. “*The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.*” (John 3:29-30) In his saying this he was alerting his followers that he was sent by God for this purpose and was now in effect taking a back seat and letting the One that God sent to be the Messiah and Savior take the reins. Whether or not he knew that he would soon be imprisoned and executed we do not know – but he knew that it was time for the bridegroom, Jesus to move to the forefront.

It is important to know that there were many self-professed ‘prophets’ and ‘messiahs’ whose life and teaching are not from God, and many of them were competing with Jesus and John, and even with the early church, for the ears, minds and hearts of both Jews and Gentiles. In John 1:10-11 the Apostle wrote “*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*”

Today is “rose Sunday” with the message of Joy – but the hard reality we must face is that there are some who – even though they hear the message of Jesus and salvation – they refuse to hear it and to take a different road. The end of that road for them is wrath, not because God is a tyrant or a bully but because earth, and all that is here on the earth, will corrupt and decay. But anyone who receives His word – who accepts that God has spoken truly through His Son,

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Jesus, is given the Holy Spirit through Him who is pouring out His love into the world. Such a person already has within himself or herself the life that, like the Son, comes from heaven.

Earlier in this third chapter of John, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Sanhedrin, Temple leadership, came to Jesus and asked Him how one could be born again. Jesus told him about being born through water and the Holy Spirit – which seemed to go right over Nicodemus' head. Jesus made it much easier for him to understand by telling him: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."* (John 3:16-21) That is the TRUTH – and Jesus made it clearer on the night before He died by saying *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life – no one comes to the Father but through Me."* (John 14:6) It all boils down to one thing – believing in the Son of Man – or not. Darkness or light? Smoking or non-smoking! (for eternity)

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus – let us always remember that all of the festivities around us are nice – but they won't get you to heaven. That can only come by believing that Jesus is who He says He is – and that in Him – and only in Him – comes eternal life. O Come. O Come Emmanuel! God with us.