

3 Advent B December 13, 2020 **What to look for when you find something new**  
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Near the beginning of the 2012 *Doctor Who* Christmas special called *The Snowmen*, we find the iconic character from the long running BBC television series carefully examining new fallen snow in Victorian England the day before Christmas. As The Doctor examines it, he realizes there is something so different about the snow it must be new. In dialogue banter typical to the series, The Doctor asks his friend, "When you find something brand new in the world, something you've never seen before, what do you look for?"

For comedic relief, and to make a subtle point that some people find new things threatening, The Doctor's friend replied, "A grenade?"

The Doctor does not hide his disappointment when he responds with the answer he had been looking for, "A prophet."

In today's reading in John's Gospel the author of the Gospel introduces us to the prophet John the Baptist as a way of showing his readers God is up to something brand new in the world, something never seen before. The purpose of a prophet is to point people to this newness, to help familiarize them with it so they can recognize the newness when they meet it in the world and hopefully grow to understand it.

We hear from John the Baptist not one Sunday but two Sundays in the Season of Advent because Advent is the season for prophets. It's the time to prepare for the new thing God is getting up to in the world, and we need prophets to introduce us to and keep pointing us to the Word Made Flesh we will celebrate at Christmas. We need prophets to remind us the routines that we fall into, routines that can bring us comfort, that we can take for granted may be disrupted by God at work in the world. We need the reminder that while such disruptions might be uncomfortable, maybe even feels like the world is ending, such disruption might be another sign of God's presence. Prophets can help us recognize the holy in the midst of change and help prevent us from getting lost or confused in the uncertainty caused by disruptions and keep us from despair.

We've certainly experienced a lot of disruptions due to the pandemic this year, and they haven't slowed down. Many in-person activities we had hoped to see restored in December are in fact not going to be, which means many of us will have

to change how we celebrate some of our cherished holiday traditions. In our local community the hospital is temporarily closing operating rooms because there isn't enough staff to provide care for the additional COVID patients and the usual hospital patients. Government agencies are starting to advise refraining from travel and attending gatherings. Last week we even learned from the Diocese that Episcopal Churches in Ohio will not be able to hold in-person Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services due to the recent spikes in new cases of COVID-19 in our county and our state. Which means even with the latest developments in the COVID vaccine, we still have a way to go before this pandemic is over.

All this disruption and change brings a weariness and feeling of loss, which is a source of grief. For some people, this might be their first Christmas where they can't be with their family, or attend a church service, or participate in some other cherished tradition. With all this grief and disruption, it can be easy to be frightened, to feel things aren't going to improve when we want, the way we want. That is why we need prophets, especially John the Baptist. He not only points us toward Jesus during this unprecedented time, but he also shows us how to keep our focus on Jesus.

That is who John is. When asked his identity by religious leaders in today's Gospel, I hope you noticed John couldn't answer who he is without referring to his connection to Jesus. John the Baptist said he was the "voice crying in the wilderness" "preparing the way" for the one who comes after him. John shows he has not come to cause harm, but to help people through the wilderness of disruption, to help them recognize the need to make room in their lives for Jesus and the healing, mercy, forgiveness, mercy, love, and salvation he brings.

The example of John the Baptist can also help inspire us when we need to assume the role of prophet, of helping prepare and point people to the love of God in Christ. I saw this happen here at Church of the Good Shepherd this week. The newest COVID guidelines from the Diocese tell us we need to temporarily suspend in-person worship and ministry involving in-person gatherings through the end of the year. One of our important ministries directly impacted by these new guidelines is Wednesday Free Lunch. A group of dedicated volunteers have had to make more changes to the adaptations they have already worked hard on to ensure we still provide a free meal once a week. I watched this group address concerns with continuing with in-person lunch distribution. There was some sadness and frustration.

But there was also the reminder of what is important to us at Church of the Good Shepherd, and that is how we embody the love of God in Christ as best we can at all times. In other words, what matters is finding a way to provide food to anyone who is hungry in ways that don't risk spreading the virus. I saw the volunteers problem solve their way to a new idea. Instead of offering a packaged prepared meal, they bought a small cabinet, with some modifications are able to stock the cabinet with non-perishable food items that are healthy. This certainly isn't Wednesday Free Lunch "the way we've always done it", but it is doing what we can in this moment in time. It's not a permanent change, but it is a hopeful one, which makes it a prophetic one, and might be exactly what someone needs this week. I am grateful for the intrepid group of volunteers who saw the way to Jesus and pointed us all toward Jesus in this latest new change caused by the pandemic. They are not only keeping a vital ministry going; they are also an example of hope.

It's a prophetic expression of faith in an uncertain time. No matter what other changes happen this month, this year, this Season of Advent, I hope we are all able to recognize and be grateful for the prophets helping us through this wilderness time and do our part to help each other so that we can through this time together.