

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Third Sunday of Advent; December 17, 2017

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## “Only a Voice...”

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Scripture: John 1:6-8, 19-28; 3 Advent B RCL

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You know, I'm not so sure we Americans do well with second place. We heap our adulation upon the hero, the one who rises to the top, who claims the superior position and then can survey the vanquished below. We love the underdog who, against all the odds, rises to be the winner, and by what seems to be acceptable social convention, thus designates everyone else... the loser. Second place is important, but only for making first place a reality. Wasn't it professional golfer Walter Hagen who famously said, "Nobody remembers who comes in second"? And many years later, racecar driver Bobby Unser followed that up with, "Well, nobody remembers who finished second, except the one who finished second."

Well, I say... nobody remembers who came in second except, maybe, the church. I don't have to look any farther than this morning's story from John's gospel to understand the importance of humility in this life of faith. By all indications, John has a claim to first place. He has a following. Scripture tells us that people from all over are coming to John as a spiritual leader. He even has his own disciples. Some apparently think he may be the savior of their people, the Messiah, the one their

parents and grandparents and great-grandparents before them hoped would come. And John gets noticed. Remember, scripture tells us he's a fiery preacher, a strange sort of man, seems unafraid of anyone, willing to insult most everyone, even the king. And his brand is growing among the common folk, so much so that the "real" religious leaders, the "respectable" people, are starting to take notice. The Pharisees send a contingent of subordinates to check him out, to get the story straight. "Who are you?" his challengers ask. And John has the chance to claim first place. And what John tells them is... second place. *Oh, I'm not the messiah, guys. Sorry. And no matter how all this looks ---the crowds, the followers, the baptizing, the preaching, the popularity--- no matter how all this looks, it's not even really second place. If the messiah were here now, I would be embarrassed even to help him remove his dirty sandals. That's how inconsequential I am.*

But we know better than that. For as long as the church has remembered Jesus, we have remembered John. He is hardly inconsequential to us. It doesn't matter that John isn't the Messiah. He gave his life waiting for the Messiah, helping others prepare for the Messiah, still helping us now to prepare for the Messiah. He helps us set the bar on the graciousness of humility. We Christians absolutely remember second place... and third and fourth and fifth. Really, when we are at our best, we remember that there is no contest among us to be in first place, or any place. There was no contest between Jesus and John, though the religious leaders in their

day may have expected it. But John shows a different way. *I'm no messiah, no Elijah, no great prophet, says John. Just a voice. A voice saying... get ready.*

How sorely I feel in these times that we need such a voice, such on example. We are loud and verbose, the Internet making all opinions ubiquitous and available. Our leaders incessantly struggle to achieve some ideal called "greatness." Too much controversy, too much of the adversary. Who will rise to the top? Who will be the winner and who, consequently will be the loser? Well, I think it is probably fair to say that if there is only one winner, or one class of winners, or one nation of winners, or one race of winners, or one party of winners, or one religion of winners, then I expect we will all be the losers. Because I don't think God create us to be first, but to be good for each other; not always to be comfortable, but always to be helpful; not always to win, but always to hope. In this way, we all have a place in the graciousness of God.

I think it worth remembering in this season of Advent that the church often remembers its people not because they are first, but because they are beloved and real. The saints are not always winners, nor do they always get their way. Rather they express some devotion, some understanding, some outright humility as to warrant our thanksgiving and our remembrance. John is one of those saints, a voice calling us to our own humble service as we await the coming of the Messiah. Mary is one of those

saints, who in her song reminds us that the Lord is casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. Paul is one of those saints who tells us that the center of the faithful life is not power, success, or “first place”, but rather to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances.”

So, how will you use your voice this Advent? How shall we, the church, use our voices this Advent? Surely not as a call to adversity, as a harbinger of worry, as a claim of privilege for our opinions and our rights? Perhaps our voices can be heard as comfort in the wilderness of life, as invitations to patience and understanding for all people, as messages of hope in a loving savior? How will we take our place, not necessarily among those the world calls winners, but within a world God loves entirely? The ancient wisdom in the prayer attributed to St. Francis certainly gives us guidance:

*...Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Maybe such a faithful way of living doesn't put us in what the world would see as first place, but it likely puts us in this season of Advent in the right place.