

Advent 2B Rev Heather Toms

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, o lord, my rock and my redeemer.

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A number of years ago Max and I were in Singapore the largest port in Southeast Asia and one of the busiest maritime ports in the world. A clean city and a very humid place. Here we were standing at the main entrance of a huge, luxurious hotel with its colonial-style architecture and lush tropical gardens.

Presiding over this elegant space in front of the hotel are the doormen and they are the most distinguished and famous staff, dressed in their immaculate white turbans and spotless and pressed attire. Max and I stood there overwhelmed by the stature of the men and the beauty of such a building. So here, we were out the front a place we have never been before. We have never seen doormen so elegantly and grandly dressed like these men. Never seen such grand and prestigious cars coming and going. What do we do and how do we manage to go inside. Should we dare enter, or speak to the doorman? Of course, they are famous for their Singapore Sling, their wonderful boutiques and graceful courtyards should we dare enter inside this opulent beautiful white hotel and maybe just maybe be adventurous. Dare we speak to the doorman, dare we walk through the front doors.

Which option do we choose? Let him usher us into the Grand Lobby. Stay outside and just look as a bystander in the humidity of the day.

Of course, this is not how it happens, however, when priests and Levites were sent down from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist some questions. John works as the doorman, the doorman to God's hotel. But these priests, Levites, and those who sent them refuse simply to have John open the door for them.

And they ask him. 'What then?' (1:19) 'Are you Elijah?' (1:21) 'Are you the prophet?' John grows more impatient as he answers each successive question. 'I am not the Messiah.' 'I am not Elijah.' 'I am not the prophet.'

They continue and ask again, 'What do you say about yourself?' (1:22) He answers, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (1:23).

This is what John insists: 'I am only a voice; I am not the message. I am the doorman of God's hotel; I am not the host at the banquet.' John's witness transcends all of time as he bears witness to the light that came into a darkened world. John came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. For the true light, which enlightens every person, was coming into the world and John's role as witness and Jesus' role as light are inseparable.

John dresses as noticeably as any doorman, but quite differently. For John there is no immaculate white turban and beautifully pressed outfit. John is plainly dressed, wearing a camel's hair garment, a leather girdle, and a wild hairstyle, apparently he never cut his hair. He wore the garb that resembled what the ancient prophets wore. He appeared to act the part as well nothing pretentious about John there was nothing lavish about his style. However, he was a man completely devoted to his task.

Perhaps there is reason to believe that those priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem failed to understand that for all their fussing around about John, they seem to miss his message. Standing outside looking on in what may have been a chilled damp day, they do not have enough sense to let this doorman usher them inside to the banquet that awaits them, an unforgettable feast.

This can often happen to us in life. We become somewhat distracted by many things that are of secondary importance and in such we think we have a special awareness, reason to be in control, more concerned about our own personal endeavours, the right to take charge.

And, so we do something foolish. It may not be scoffing the doorman's lavish pristine attire. We want him to re adjust his turban or adjust his jacket, or not open the door correctly, or perhaps fumble a tad while all the time there waits for us within the hotel the banquet of a lifetime.

We home in on the inconsequential because we are very skilled at small talk, we know how to pass the time of day and we can go through this routine in our sleep. However, there appears to be a problem, and John the Baptist, doorman to God's own hotel, would be the first to agree: we spend so much of our lives asleep. We hesitate to wake up, even to the splendor in front of our faces.

We send our own priests and Levites to interview John for us instead. We expect our religion to make us happy, healthy, wealthy and wise. Some other person often in the political sphere or on our television mediates reality. Just think of the world and current situations.

But here John stands on the footpath, doorman to the greatest of all hotels, while inside candles are burning brightly, and waiters are at their places, and the kitchen staff hurry about preparing the splendid feast.

In the Orthodox Church, the sanctuary is separated from the congregation by a wall pierced by several doors. The central ones, known as the royal doors, are opened at certain critical points in the service.

Eugene Trubetskoy, a Russian prince and a religious philosopher, in the Time of the Spirit referred to this in his dying words, when he cried out, 'The royal doors are

opening! The great Liturgy is about to begin.” What he had seen so often in the church’s liturgy on earth was now apparent to him in the liturgy that takes places in heaven. For him this was the moment when God was especially present. The royal doors, holy doors, beautiful gates were opening in a new and astounding way.

And perhaps for us, especially in this time of Advent, to recognize how the death of a Christian is like that. The royal doors, the holy doors open. The great Liturgy is about to begin and God’s presence is overwhelming.

Yet what is true when we die holds true as long as we shall live. We can shift our attention from inconsequential routine, predictable small talk, and all things that seem safe because we think we can control them, and notice instead that the doorman, John the Baptist, wants to usher us inside the greatest hotel of all. We can discover that religion, that life itself, is not a matter of assessing the doorman, finding fault; it is coming to accept with humility the hospitality and grace of God.

What Eugene Trubetskoy spoke of at the moment of his death is not only true when our earthly end arrives. It is not only true in these weeks of Advent. In a strange and wonderful way, it holds true at every moment, if only we remain awake and attentive. And, then we can come to our final end receptive and grateful because this holds true at every moment.

‘The royal doors, the beautiful gates are opening! The great Liturgy is about to begin.’

In the first week of advent our visual was a cracked pot, with the beauty of gold and the light entering through, the second week we had the hands outstretched and the light steaming out and around, this week we have the broken heart opening to the light. May we ponder on how we spread the light in these uncertain times that are so dark for so many in our communities and in the far wider world around us? May we expand our Christmas vision, to light up the whole world in every corner possible?

In the readings, we have heard one thing is clear we are not hitchhikers when it comes to God’s mission in the world. Christ came for us, to work with us and through us. God goes before, behind and above us. John, who is not the light, but in the words of Jesus, ‘was a lamp that was kindled and shining. Let our light shine in our hearts today and forever. Let Christ be our Light. Amen

Your Light in the Darkness

Dear God
I breathe in
Your Light and Love.

Dear God
I breathe out
all that disturbs and divides me
and diverts me from being present with You.

Dear God
I move forward
and choose to live
the freedom and courage of Your love
the transforming power of Your Light
the resolve and passion of Your Heart
Your drive to liberate me.

By Noel Davis – Heat coming Home