

*"Now may the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."*

Possible Prayer of Church + 4th Sunday of Advent Rorate Coeli December 21st

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. [Possible Brief silence]

Heavenly Father, throughout this Advent season we have heard that Christ has come in the flesh, that He comes to us today in Word and Sacrament, and that He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may be kept firm in Your Word and faith until we are received into Your eternal kingdom. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

God of faithfulness, You have fulfilled Your promises by sending the Messiah. Grant that we may celebrate the birth of Christ by hearing the Word, singing Your praises, and receiving His body and blood. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

Almighty Father, You uphold all creation by Your hand. Preserve for Your Church and for future generations the institution of marriage between one man and one woman, which You established even before Adam and Eve's fall into sin, that Your Church may be blessed with many children and that our families may reflect the order of Your creation. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our...***

Lord of all, govern the nations of the world. Establish peace in every place, and scatter the people who delight in war. Feed the hungry with good things, and be their helper. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

Grant all women with child and all mothers with infant children increasing happiness in their blessings. Look with compassion on the lonely, the depressed and the despairing. Grant healing to the sick, and give peace to the anxious and dying [*especially F.OS.L Prayers*]. Comfort all who mourn with the certain hope of the Resurrection. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

O Lord, fill us with joy as we approach Your altar this morning to receive the body and blood of Christ. Give us the peace that surpasses understanding, the gladness that no man can take from us and the hope that does not fade away. *LORD, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.***

Lord God, Heavenly Father, Your love invites us to rejoice in Your goodness. In every circumstance of life, teach us the joy that comes from knowing Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and eagerly expecting His gracious visitation. Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, *through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

INTRODUCTION STORY "**Barry**" = five year old nephew of the bride was in charge of carrying the rings. - Wedding rehearsal - unusually unruly. He kept **leaping out at people, baring his teeth at and then chasing the flower girls.** He growled and snarled as he practiced going down the aisle. He held up the pillow and his arms like claws. Finally his mother pulled him aside and demanded to know why he was behaving so badly.

"*But Mom,*" he explained, *"I have to act fierce. I'm the Ring BEAR."* Like so many of us that **little boy misunderstood** just what **ROLE** he was supposed to play. **He thought he was to BE the "star of the show."** He thought the spotlight was his.

But he **wasn't supposed to BE a bear**, he was supposed to offer the supportive role of ring bear**ER**. His role was important. But he was not the star.

ADVENT3/A John 1:6-8,19-28 *Know Who You ARE, And NOT 12.21.25 F.OS*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. John 1:6-8

BARRY, THE [RING] BEAR [STORY] ... It's good to **know who you are, and who you are not.** John the Baptizer knew Who he was, and who he was not. ... In this week's Advent Gospel text [the other] **John**, the author of the fourth Gospel, has no trouble distinguishing the one, John, who "*bears witness*" to the light from the One who actually IS the light...**So what do YOU think of John the Baptist?** You've had a week to think about him, to live with this Advent image in your head of this wilderness prophet.

ARE YOU *THE ONE*? He wasn't the Messiah, the Christ. A delegation of priests and Levites from "synod headquarters" in Jerusalem went out to John to investigate. [They always send a committee.] "*Who are you?*" they wanted to know of this wilderness man with strange clothing and an even stranger diet. **Are you the Messiah?** People had been watching and waiting for Messiah. They were expecting someone who would rally the troops, liberate Israel, and establish the throne of David. They were looking for superman, the mythical mighty man, the one who was going to act for truth, justice, and the Israelite way. A leader of a true "holy" war. Maybe this [wilderness] John was the one.

NO. I AM **NOT**. "**No,**" John said. "I'm **not** the Christ." He was another, a greater One than John. Cousin Jesus who was on His way to Jordan's water to be revealed as the Anointed One. But John was clear, he wasn't the Messiah everyone was waiting for.

"*ARE YOU ELIJAH?*" . . . they asked him. The prophet Malachi has said 450 years earlier that Elijah would appear before the day the LORD appears. Maybe he was Elijah. He kind of looked like Elijah, with the camel-hair coat and all. And he appeared at roughly the same wilderness place that Elijah has disappeared in a fiery chariot. So, maybe he was Elijah.

EVEN IF JESUS SAYS Jesus said he was. "*All the prophets and the Torah prophesied until John; and if you are willing to receive it, **he is Elijah who is to come.***" But John wasn't willing to lay that on himself. That was for Jesus to say. John didn't seek celebrity. His job was to point to Jesus and **step out of the way.** And so the simple answer, "**No, I'm not Elijah.**"

OK. R. U. *THE PROPHET?* "*Are you the **Prophet**, then,*" they persisted. If not the Christ or Elijah, maybe the Prophet of whom Moses spoke. **YahWeH**, your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" [Deuteronomy 18:15]. He sure fit the bill. ... But again a simple and direct "**No.**"

ALRIGHT, **WHO?!** "Who then are you?" John refused to work with their categories, their framework, the pigeonholes they wanted to put him and everyone in [eventually even Jesus]. He gives them only what they

need to know. ***“I’m a voice calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the LORD.”***

WHY? *“Why then are you baptizing,” they ask him. “**Who authorized you to do this if you aren’t Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?**”*

BACK-DOOR/BACK-WOODS John never answers their question. Instead he points to Jesus and says, *“I’m not worthy even to bend down and tie His shoes laces.”* It all happened in the obscure town of Bethany. Not the one near Jerusalem, but the one in the wilderness, on the other side of the Jordan, far away from Jerusalem and the temple. **That’s how God works**, seemingly subversive, “sneaking in through our back door.”

CAN I GET A WITNESS **John was a witness.** A witness tells of what he saw and heard. He doesn’t talk about himself. If you are called as a witness in a trial, you aren’t called to talk about yourself, but about the facts, what you saw and heard. Feelings don’t count when it comes to testimony. Not that feelings don’t matter, they’re just irrelevant unless you’re testifying to your feelings. But John wasn’t here to talk about [his] feelings.

NO SPOTLIGHT HERE John’s witness was **not** to talk about **how he felt about Jesus**, or how **close he felt to God**. *“He himself was not the Light; he came only as a witness to the Light.”* John didn’t seek the spotlight. He didn’t want to be centerstage. I see **a man extremely UNcomfortable with the public eye**, and with all the questions. John wouldn’t care if you forgot his name. All John wanted to do was point his bony finger **in the direction of Jesus** and say, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus-increase; John-decrease.***

CULTURE [CLASH] That’s very difficult for us to accept. It wars against everything going on around us and inside of us. We live in a **celebrity-driven culture**. We elect action heroes and pro wrestlers as governors and B-grade actors and billionaires as president. We define success in terms of the attention paid to us. Our “Hollywood mentality” will do about anything for that fleeting 15 minutes of fame.

“IT’S ALL ABOUT ME” It’s in each of us, too. Old Adam and Eve are **very self-oriented, self-centered, self-absorbed**. Children, even the littlest ones, show this inborn tendency. They are the center of the universe if you let them, and everyone is at their beck and call. Our desire to control each other is more of the same. We **think**, Not only do I know what’s best for me, I know what’s best **for you too**. The sin of self-centeredness is a **virus**, worse than COVID, that pervades our humanity. **We want to be [little] gods**, and we don’t look highly on the competition.

WHOSE CHURCH IS IT? It infects our churches and their leaders too. **Celebrity pastors, mega-churches.** ***“Look at ME, look at US. Come to OUR church.”*** I cringe when I hear people say “YOUR church” or “Pastor Andy’s congregation.” There were [13?] pastors here before me, and it wasn’t their congregation either. It’s **the LORD’s church**: His Word, His

Baptism, His Body and Blood, His ministry, His people. It’s all the Lord’s. We just work here.

STOP BRAGGING The congregation at **Corinth** was also infected with the celebrity virus. People would say, “I follow **Paul**” or “I follow **Cephas**(Peter)” or “I follow **Apollos**” or “I follow **Christ**.” And Paul says, “We’re nothing but workmen, building on the foundation of Christ. You are God’s field, God’s building. We’re nothing but **carpenters and bricklayers and plumbers**.” He says, “So then, ***no more boasting about men!*** All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all are yours and you are Christ’s and Christ is of God.” **[1 Corinthians 3:21]**

HOW TO EVANGELIZE The apologist **John Warwick Montgomery** wrote a provocative little book intended to ruffle feathers entitled, ***Damned THROUGH the Church***. His point was that **you don’t invite people to go to church**, as if going to church is **the good work that saves them**. You proclaim the saving Person and work of Jesus Christ, how the Son of God became Man, suffered and died for the sin of the world and rose from the dead to justify us before God. How He gives out the gifts of His death and Resurrection in that bunch of believers He’s gathered together for just that purpose. In other words, you don’t point to yourself and your piety or the preacher or the programs or success of your religion. You point to Jesus Christ whose Body is the Church. You point to: **Christ’s Word of Forgiveness, to Baptism, to the Supper of Christ’s Body and Blood.**

WHAT HE’D SAY TODAY I wonder what John would say if he walked in this morning and stood in this pulpit. I think he’d probably take note of our **comfort**, our **complacency**, our **casualness**. He’d certainly call us to repent and prepare the way of the LORD. He’d probably chide us for all the **silly things that cause us distraction** in church, all those things **we think** are so important-but **aren’t**. He’d stare us in the eye and say, ***“Forget about your felt needs, your feelings, your problems, your pieties. Forget about yourSELF. Christ must increase; you must decrease.*** And that’s going to be good for you, because in losing your self you will find your self **in Christ**, and in dying each day to sin, you will **rise to new life IN JESUS!**”

AND HE’D SAY... John would also point out **how blessed you and I are**. He never lived to see how it all came out - Jesus’ Death and Resurrection. **We know how it came out**. We have the **eyewitness testimony**, the written account/s of the **Gospels**. We have a **Baptism** greater than John’s - of water and **the Holy Spirit**. Buried with Christ in His death; raised with Him in His Resurrection. We have the **Supper of Jesus’ very Body and Blood**.

DON’T BE A BEAR. BE A BEAR-ER **John knew who he was, and Who Christ IS**. He knew his role. He knew he was **not** the Light; He knew Jesus was, and trusted Him. Jesus is your Light and your Life. Christ comes here and now **to forgive you**, He is your Light in the darkness of sin and death. He comes soon **to raise you and give you Life. IJ’N, Amen.**