

Dear John,

When I was a child, my grandmother often told my sister and me: “Don’t believe everything you hear out there. You just remember who you are and whose you are. You’re God’s child.” She said this to us whenever we were upset or when we had hurt someone else. And when we succeeded, she would say it as a reminder that all goodness comes from God. Her words came to mind as I read the other John’s account of your story and saw you in a different light. It’s what led me to write you this letter of thanks. Thank you for claiming the truth of who you and whose you so unapologetically. You’re an inspiration to my friends and me, especially in this Advent season of preparation.

I’ll be frank though: you’re the last person to whom I’d ever thought I’d write a letter of gratitude. If anything, I’ve always found you kind of annoying. You never tamed your camel-like hair. You ate bugs with a dash of honey like a Texan eats anything with a cup of salsa. Who cares that some people saw this as proof that you were a second coming of the prophet Elijah; it’s simply not an image with which I can connect. On top of that, I’ve always found your constant refrain “Repent, the kingdom is near!” so harsh and disinviting. You were like a first-century version of Westboro Baptist Church damning everyone to hell in a hand-basket. Between everything that’s going on here: the hurricanes, a political system that seems devoid of rhyme or reason, the threat of nuclear war never too far in the distance, and the quotidian of daily life, I cringed when I sat down to read your story because the last thing my friends and I need to hear right now is we need to get it together from a guy who can’t even get it together to brush his hair. (No offense or anything, I’m just saying.)

But, I had you all wrong. Certainly wouldn’t be the first time I was wrong about someone. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the other John never mentions your appearance or your esteemed lineage from a line of priests. There’s no talk of your miraculous birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah. As a matter of fact, the Gospel writer strips you of all that would give you credibility, authority, and utility. He simply says that you are John, a man whom God has sent to tell everyone within the sound of your voice your story. That’s it. No fancy titles, no angelic choirs or shepherds watching their sheep by night. When the religious leaders, of which your dad was once a member, asked you who you were, you never wavered or doubted the merit of your work as John, a witness, a storyteller. I mean what’s

so noteworthy about that? We're all witnesses to something. For you though, knowing from whence you came was enough. There was no need to impress people, no need to bemoan that you weren't making a difference because you weren't reaching millions and single-handedly solving all the world's problems. You said what you dare to believe is true that although it is indeed a dark and foreboding time, the Light is coming. Prepare your heart to receive the light. heart ready to receive the Light. "The darkest forces in the world are not finally as powerful as they appear."¹ You have reminded us once again that faith is not agreeing to some religious ideas, it's radically trusting in the work of God even when you can't see the next step and so you walked ahead anyway.²

That is why on this third Sunday of Advent—this Sunday of joy—you have become the most unlikely source of joy because you were the furthest thing from the ideal messenger. You had nothing but your experience and your words, and that was enough. We hear you John. We see you. And as my grandmother would say, "nobody can mess with you when you know who you are and whose you are." Now I better understand that your call to repentance isn't a threat. It's an invitation to take a good hard look at what's keeping us from throwing out our familiar expectations of being in relationship with God and learn what it means to live as One who belongs to God and is called to let themselves be changed by God's love and thereby change others.

I like how Greg Boyle, one of my favorite writers and a Jesuit priest, says it: "During Advent, we are called to prepare the way...to 'make straight the path' and smooth what is rocky. Our hardwiring is such that we hear these invitations as a demand 'to straighten up' or 'get our act together.' But it's not we who needs changing—it's our crooked path that needs to be smoothed...so we can be reached by God's tenderness."³ That is the promise of Christmas, the promise of Christ's coming. God has broken into our dark and gathered all of our hopes and fears into one single night. And in a startled infant's this God says to us: "follow me, I'll lead you home."

So, thank you John.

¹ Gary W. Charles, "John 1:6-8, 19-28, Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, v. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 73.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "John 1:6-8, 19-28, Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, v. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 71.

³ Greg Boyle quoted in Mariann Budde, "Good News in the Wilderness: Radical Kinship," *Gathering Up the Fragments* (blog), December 7, 2017, <https://www.edow.org/about/bishop-mariann/writings/2017/12/07/good-news-wilderness-radical-kinship-adventinspiration>.

Thank you for showing us what it means to live knowing who we are and whose we
here.

We're ready to come home.

Love always,
Maria

The Rev. Dr. Maria A. Kane
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waldorf, MD
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