

Lent Devotional March 14, 2025

Scripture

John 3:22-36

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24 —John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease."

31 The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. 34 He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

Devotion

The Rev. Daniel Voigt '11

When I was a student at PTS, there was, roped off in the library, Karl Barth's desk, with a depiction of the center section of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald mounted on the wall behind it. You should look up this piece of art to see it for yourselves, but in it, Jesus hangs on the cross in the center. On the left is a woman weeping, with the beloved disciple holding Mary. On the right, anachronistically placed, is a messy John the Baptist, holding the New Testament and pointing at the crucified messiah.

This image of John the Baptist in particular is said to have left a significant mark on Barth. And, if I'm honest, on me too. An image exemplifying that the whole point of John's work and/or the New Testament is only any good as long as it points toward Christ. I suspect Barth felt the same.

In the passage today from John 3, we find what seem to be people coming to John expecting him to be jealous of Jesus' success. But nothing could be further from the truth. The news that people are finally looking to Christ fills him with joy—a joy he chose to express in words that must have sounded strange to those who came to him, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

We must admit that for us, too, the part that longs to be recognized for doing important work finds this phrase disheartening. But for John, his greatest joy was in knowing that people weren't getting caught up in him or his message but were (hopefully) directed by these to go further until they found the source of the good news.

Could there be a better mantra for our lives of faith? Or the church?

It is worth noting that Grünewald, of all the words in the New Testament, chose these from John to inscribe on his work—choosing to make the desire of John’s heart his own.

Prayer

Holy one, we confess that we love to have our egos fed. Something deep in us loves to be noticed and feel important. But John the Baptist reminds us that our most purposeful role is when we make a pathway for you. By your creative hand, you have given me many gifts, breath in my lungs, and a mind of my own. May they be used for more than just getting people to think highly of me. May they be used for their highest good. May they, in their best moments, point others to you. And may that desire be my joy.