

## **The Feast of St. John, the Third Day of Christmas, A ✕ D 2009**

**John 21:20-25, 1 John 1:1-2:2**

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 There are three types of martyrs: those martyrs in both will and deed, who are willing to die confessing the Gospel and do, martyrs in will but not in deed, those who are willing to die confessing the Gospel, but who die a natural death, and martyrs in deed but not in will, those who do not wish for a martyr's death but who are nevertheless given it. The three days after Christmas are privileged feasts, celebrated over the Sundays after Christmas when they fall on a Sunday, Christmas feasts that mark each of these three types of martyrdom. On the second day of Christmas, December 26, the Church gives to you the Feast of St. Stephen. You remember Stephen: he was stoned to death, the first willing martyr in the New Testament, for preaching that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The last words from his mouth before he fell dead were words of absolution for his murderers: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." On the third day of Christmas, today, the Church gives to you the Feast of St. John the Evangelist. While John never was martyred for his faith, he was arrested and sent into exile on the island of Patmos, unable to help the church where he was bishop during the midst of persecution. And on the fourth day of Christmas, tomorrow, December 28, the Church gives to you the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the two-year-old-and-younger babies in Bethlehem Herod had slaughtered to prevent the Infant King from usurping Herod's throne. Blood and death, exile and loneliness, and more blood and death. For millennia, the Church has celebrated the second, third, and fourth days of Christmas with the stark reality of martyrdom. Christmas and bloodshed go hand-in-hand.

2 John and his brother James, the sons of Zebedee, were fishermen when Jesus called them to leave their nets and follow Him. Eventually, Jesus gave them the nickname, Boanerges, or Sons of Thunder. John is known as the "disciple Jesus loved" and would become the author of five books of the New Testament. John, with his brother James, and Peter, were part of the inner circle of the apostles, witnessing the raising of Jairus' daughter, the Transfiguration, and Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. John and Peter were sent to prepare for the Passover Meal. And

it was John who reclined on Jesus' chest at that meal. Later, John and Peter followed Jesus into the palace of the high priest after He was arrested. And John is the only apostle recorded at the foot of the cross, into whose care Jesus gives His mother Mary. John and Peter run to the empty tomb to see first-hand what the women had told them, but John out sprinted Peter. After Jesus' Ascension, John and Peter play a significant role together in the formation of the Church: John is there with Peter when the lame man is healed and goes into the temple; he and Peter are arrested and imprisoned together; and the two of them visit the newly converted in Samaria. St. Paul calls John, along with Peter and James, the "pillars" of the Church (Gal 2:9). John became the bishop of Ephesus until he was exiled to the island of Patmos under the persecution by Roman Emperor Domitian. It's there that the Lord gave John his vision, the Apocalypse of the age of the Church—from the Ascension until Christ's return. John outlived all the other apostles, who were martyred, dying around 100 AD in Ephesus. One historian recounts the story of an elderly John being brought in to preach, and repeating over and over "Little children, love each other."

3 John has a Christmas present for you. "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing, you may have life in His name." "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 1:5-2:2).

4 Be careful what you pray for. If you pray for light, as you did in the collect, you will get Light. "Cast the bright beams of your light upon Your Church, that we, being instructed in the doctrine of Your blessed apostle and evangelist, John, may come to the light of everlasting life."

The Light you will get is Light with a capital L; the Light you will get is God. God is Light and in Him there is no darkness. Light doesn't discriminate. It illuminates everywhere it shines. And this light is like none other. It blazes brilliantly; it brings everything to light. Nothing is hidden. How does that make you feel? Nothing is hidden from God. God knows your heart. Even the things you try to hide to yourself are known to Him.

5 This Light illuminates all the corners of your life. The thoughts that just flit through your mind for a moment are in the spotlight. The secret desires, your wish for a time before God blessed you with children, your hateful thoughts toward your coworkers, your envious thoughts toward your sibling, your brief thought that wonders what life would be like with a different spouse. But the spotlight doesn't stop there. It shines brighter and deeper. It shines to those thoughts you try to keep hidden even from yourself, the thoughts of hatred toward a God who would be so rigid with His Law, the thoughts of self-righteousness, that would conform everyone else in the world to be just like you, the thoughts of despair, that question how God can be good when there is so much evil. Every thought, every desire, every wish is known to God. He is the Light that shines into the darkest corners of your life. He knows the secrets you've told no one, the self-indulgent fantasies you'd be embarrassed if they got out, the self-righteous hypocrisy. Repent.

6 But this Light is good. Even this exposing of your sins is good. The point of bringing your sins to light with the spotlight of the Law is not to shame you, not to humiliate you. The point of illuminating your sin is to forgive it. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In this Light, the Blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. In this Light, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. It's John's account of the Gospel that records the words of Jesus, "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life."

7 Light comes from darkness, and life comes from death. The Light of the World, who came to give Life to all mankind, died. And when He died, darkness fell over all the earth. His Blood is the covering for sins, and Blood only comes when it's shed. The Light of God became incarnate to die. He took flesh to give His flesh for the sins of the world. He took human blood

for no other reason than to shed it. The Light comes to expose your sin in order to forgive it. Confession has two parts, first that we confess our sins and second that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor, as from God Himself. The point is not to expose your sin for any reason except to forgive it.

8        These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing, you may have life in His name. In this Light, all sin is forgiven, burned away by the Light, covered by the shed Blood of the Lamb. In this Light, there is no distinction, all are forgiven. Fisherman are made missionaries and churchmen; murderers and haters are made lovers; thieves are made protectors; gossipers are made tight-lipped defenders of each others' reputations; old men are made the children of God; arch enemies are made fellow Christians and co-heirs of eternal life. In this Light, sinners are made saints. Stay in this Light, eat the Body of Him who keeps you in His light. Drink the Blood that covers your sins. Remain in the Light. God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Pastor Jeff Hemmer

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