

OPENING:

On the way into the service last week, a choir member, Glenn Rudolph, asked me about the colors used in Advent, this question about purple vs. blue.

Today, you indeed see me dressed in blue, like Papa Smurf, but you might remember a time when purple was the color of Advent, and we still have that with our advent candles.

What 'in the name of John the Baptist' is the color of Advent supposed to be?

The short version is that royal purple has been used traditionally for Advent, as it is in Lent, as a symbol of penitence and preparation.

In this way of thinking, Advent is a "little Lent" in which you prepare for Christmas like you prepare for Easter during Lent.

More recently, the color blue, "Sarum Blue" has entered the conversation (and the color palette) for the Advent Season. This is an effort to shift from the gloomy and self-denying focus of Lent and towards something more hopeful and positive. "Advent Blue", in that way of thinking, makes this a season of hope and expectancy, and it connects with Mary, and "Marian Blue", and this sense of anticipation and waiting more appropriate for the Season.¹

JOHN the BAPTIST:

In our Gospel reading, the priests and the Levites from Jerusalem ask John the Baptist:

Who are you?

Are you Elijah? Are you Moses

Are you the Prophet?

Are you the Messiah?

John the Baptist keeps answering "No" to all these. 10 times, in 13 verses.

So I ask the Season of Advent:

are you blue?

are you purple?

are you pink?

¹ There are more blog posts than there are colors in the rainbow on this subject. A sampling: [Blue for Advent, an Anglican tradition. \(romananglican.blogspot.com\)](http://romananglican.blogspot.com); [Sarum Blue: The Great Untruth - PrayTellBlog](http://PrayTellBlog); [Advent Colors: History and Meaning \(buildfaith.org\)](http://buildfaith.org)

What are you?

In my time here as your clergy person, I have some experience with this topic: Andy Hamm asked me before painting the Narthex so beautifully:

“Charles would you like this painted an off-white, an almost-white, or a Reflective white?”

Like a grumpy John the Baptist, I reply “NO, NO, NO”... or more exactly: “I don’t know.”

My son Mark, meanwhile, is color blind, the gifted educators downstairs at St. Timothy’s Preschool discovered this last year.

Recently, I volunteered in his kindergarten class and one of his classmates asked me: “Excuse me, Mark’s Dad, are you color blind too?”

My answer was “No,” but my wife might argue otherwise.

Maybe that’s my problem with all these color choices from Sherwin Williams. I cannot actually tell you the difference.

GOSPEL

Speaking of Mark, remember last week when I bore my soul about the Gospel of Mark and its importance to me and to my understanding of the Gospel.

The perceptive among you should have noticed that, this week, after me making such a big deal about the Marcan year, that we have jumped over to the Gospel of John and now we are talking about the color of church things, the very thing that other denominations always accuse us Episcopalians of focusing too much on.

Now I indeed cannot tell the differences between colors but I *can* wax poetic about how the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke & John—differ in shade and accent. In John’s Gospel, John the Baptist is not a Baptizer, not even a Baptist.

He is just a voice, a witness who provides testimony.

That’s very different from the other gospels where John the Baptist is described in vivid imagery, as this colorful and important figure in history.

Here in John, though, John the Baptist is a really good witness *because* he does not make it about himself.

He just says: “Nope I am not that that, I am not that, I am not that....

I am pointing to what is.”

John the Baptist came to testify to the light, he is not the light, he makes sure we know that. He is colorless and maybe even a little grumpy—single-mindedly focused on what he is pointing us to.

He is there to point to the illumination of light that is happening with the Advent of Christ.

If John the Baptist were here to decide the Blue vs. Purple debate, he might say whatever you decide is great, but don't confuse those for what we are waiting for, which is the ultimate burst of light, the technicolor dream, the rainbow reality that is God, the kaleidoscope of color known as God Incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

JESUS:

That reminds me of the old joke told, when, as a seminarian, you are headed off to take your Boards to become a Priest, there General Ordination Exams, and someone says “Don't sweat it: the answer is always Jesus, just put down Jesus.”

John the Baptist might agree: it does not matter if it's blue or purple, it's Jesus. That stirs my Low Church heart, this urge for simplicity, elegance, lack of ornamentation, a reliance on black and white Scripture, rather than the “smells and bells” and colors that other ways of doing church rely upon.

My Low Church heart, in fact, might prefer everything stark and plain, a burlap brown, or an oatmeal white.

But that would ruin the fun, including the fun of the argument.

More importantly, we, as disciples, also need all the help we can get, all the color coded messaging to light our way.

DISCIPLESHIP

Notice I still have not answered the question, purple or blue?

John Druitt in the Control Room with St. Isidore's told me after a sermon a while back that he liked my sermons and everything but I never land on answer to whatever I am talking about.

I never say “and this is how we should resolve” whatever the topic is.

A fair critique to my preaching in general but I am not going to do that here either. You will get no grand resolution to where on the color wheel we should land.

The point of me bringing up this argument, of this grand debate, is again we need all the help we can get.

If only we could just say, none of this matters, it's all about Christmas and Jesus.

It IS all about Christmas, it IS all about Jesus, but all the colorful ornamentation is designed to help our feeble and colorblind selves get there.

For example, I have broken a record in this sermon for mentions of various parishioners: at the top with Glenn, Andy Hamm, my son and wife (frequently mentioned), John, the preschool.

This is intentional. I think it helps to incarnate the sermon, make them real.

It's called "local color"—referring to local customs and practices—to make your point. In our path of discipleship, I need people along the way to point me to where Jesus is. I need signposts and bright glossy markers, of purple and blue and red and green. I cannot rely on metaphysics. Or a philosophy. I need followers in Christ to say: This is how I picture it. Perhaps this way, perhaps that. I even need frontals, and vestments, and candles and maybe even incense to draw our senses in... Just as long as we should never make God's church color within the lines, we should care about it, and even argue about it.

Or just ask ourselves: do you feel purple or blue this Advent?

ADVENT

Today, we are on the 3rd Week of Advent, and the pageantry of Christmas still seems very far off. Still no journey to Bethlehem, no Shepherds singing, no Wisemen bearing gifts. Just a noisy voice, coming from the void, trying to get us to focus. No Pageant yet, no costumes, no cinematic background, no supporting cast to provide color commentary. Just a voice crying in the wilderness.²

That all does sound a little bit like Lent, I will admit

To mix one more color into the mix, some Churches do something called a "Blue Christmas" or Longest Night service around the time of the Solstice. This is a service to recognize the essential darkness of this time of year, the feelings of loss that people feel around the holidays that they cannot shake, it's a recognition that all the "Holly Jollys" and confectionary bursts of color have the opposite effect. We don't have that. But what we do have is the Season of Advent which, as a seasons tries to capture all the feelings, all the pigments of human emotions. It tries and fails to capture the totality of what it feels like to wait for God: that sense of sadness, of hope, of incompleteness, of not quite being there, of waiting and watching.

AMEN

² Barbara Brown Taylor. 2008. "Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 1). Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster) 69,71,73.