

December 13, 2020
New Song Episcopal Church
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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Who are you?

Last week, Jerry talked about John the Baptist and wondered aloud about what it means to be a prophet. We had a great discussion after the sermon about it.

This week, the religious leaders of the day (Pharisees) sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to John and straight out asked him, “Who are you?”

Are you the Messiah? (This implied question was answered first.) It is here that we experience what appears to be an interrogation. John “confessed and did not deny it. I am not the Messiah.”

John was already famous. He was drawing crowds. Many false messiahs had appeared over the years and John immediately understands the question as asking both the legitimate “are you the one who is to come and save us” as well as the “are you going to deceive and cause turmoil for us” questions.

My guess is that John had heard word of rumors spreading about his identity and probably wanted to stop them quickly.

“Are you Elijah?”

The prophet Elijah didn’t die, remember? Second Kings chapter 2 describes him being taken up by a whirlwind riding in a chariot of fire pulled by fiery horses up to heaven. Elijah was renowned for amazing miracles and a strong prophetic message, frequently against the political and religious powers of his day. He was also renowned for having a unique appearance, being described as “a hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist” and for being the sort of person who always showed up before the powerful at precisely the moment they were least likely to welcome him; then he gave

messages they really didn't want to hear.

The parallel is understandable, but no, John is not Elijah.

“Are you the prophet?”

In Deuteronomy, Moses prophesied to the people of Israel that “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you.” He went on to describe that prophet who was to come and that the people must listen to him. John says he is not that prophet. Later in the Gospels, that title and role are attributed to Jesus.

So, okay then, you can hear them with some consternation in their voices, but, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

Here's where the conversation really gets interesting and where I want to take a bit of a segue for a moment.

Who are you? What do you have to say about yourself?

That's really one of the big questions in life, isn't it?

People ask us indirectly when we meet, asking “get to know you” questions about your job, where you are from, and so on, trying to find the answer without asking directly. Of course, you may also hear the rudely intoned sneer, “Who are you?”

We answer with “this is what I do” and “this is where I'm from” or maybe “here are my hobbies.” These tell something *about* us, but do they actually reveal *who we are*?

We often hear in society, “Just be yourself.”

That statement can often be a source of stress; we suddenly have to ask ourselves, “Who am I?” What does it mean to “be myself?” How do I even know who I am??

Let's get back to John.

Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent

us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

First off, I love that he responds to their questions about specific people with “I’m the one you didn’t mention.” That makes me laugh a bit. How like a prophet! So direct and a bit contradictory in the best of ways, always calling power out on its abuses.

The title John chooses, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” comes from Isaiah chapter 40. It was traditionally read to be a poetic form of Isaiah referring to himself. John taking the phrase, which the messengers from the Pharisees would certainly have recognized, is meant to give some push back at their questioning.

The subtext of John’s response is: Question yourselves. Who are you? Whom do *you* serve? Consider carefully *your* actions and prepare, for the Day of the Lord is at hand.

I got chills while preparing this. They were cousins. John knew Jesus and was intentionally working to help people be ready for Jesus to begin his public ministry. John believed in Him.

Advent is a good time for us to remember as we ourselves prepare for the coming of the Lord. I’ll abbreviate the story because I’m sure we will hear it in the coming weeks. Mary has an angel tell her about a coming child. She visits her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was also with child. Elizabeth’s baby jumps and Elizabeth prophesies. Elizabeth’s baby is John the Baptist.

John’s questioners ignore John’s response. “Why are you baptizing” if you are not one of those *WE* named?

John doesn’t give them a straight answer. Instead, he takes them down a notch or two. Unsaid was “you don’t baptize.” John does say that he baptizes with water. The big humiliation was John prophesying that another was to come and that the questioners

weren't even worthy of untying the coming one's sandals, as a slave or low servant might do to wash feet after being out all day in the dust while sandaled. The questioners were beneath the lowest of servants in John's eyes.

John was sent to prepare the way for the appearance of Jesus. He understood that he was not the one who should get all the attention or glory, but he had a role in God's larger plan to save the world.

Who are you? You are one sent with a similar task. You are not expected to look, dress, act, eat, or even speak like John. You are, however, one who has received a message of hope from the one John spoke about and who did come.

You are intended to be a hope-bringer. In this time of waiting, I suggest we all find ways to prepare ourselves to grow into who we each are intended to be.

Amen.

Old Testament

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;

they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The Response

Canticle 15

The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *

for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. *Amen.*

The Epistle

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

The Gospel

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.