



Sunday December 17, 2023
John 1:6-8, 19-28 (Third Sunday of Advent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

For the past several months our high school senior has been diligently working to finish her college applications. And a major part of the application process involves writing a personal essay, which means she's been spending *a lot* of time carefully crafting strategic answers to one question in particular, "*Who are you?*"

Now, if you've ever applied for an internship, a grant, a scholarship, or even a job then you know how daunting this process is. If you've ever obsessed over your Facebook or online dating profile, or spent hours perfecting a social media post, then you know just how complicated this question can get. Who are you? What's your brand? What carefully packaged version of yourself do you want to show the world?

But if we are going to enter this self-disclosure process with any sense of integrity then we first have to acknowledge that there are deeper questions lurking beneath the surface. *Who are you, really?* When no one's watching; when you've let your guard down; when it's only you and God, hidden away from the world – who are you then?

On this third Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading gives us John the Baptist confronting this very question at the beginning of his public ministry. He's barely gotten settled at the banks of the Jordan River when his interrogators – priests and Levites from Jerusalem – show up to try and make sense of him and keep him in check. They have questions about who this wild, untidy preacher is who's calling people to repentance. And where does his authority come from anyway? Is he crazy? Is he a threat? Do they even dare to entertain the possibility that he might actually be a messenger from God?

Then John begins his answer to the religious leaders by saying who he's *not*: "*I am not the Messiah.*" "*I am not Elijah.*" "*I am not the prophet.*"

I wonder then if it would be best for *us* to begin where John begins. Because before we can figure out who we are, we need to clarify for ourselves and for the world, who we are not. *We are not Jesus. We are not Saviors. We are not foolproof.*

It's important for us to recognize that some of the most damaging mistakes the Christian Church has made throughout history has been to claim identities, powers, and privileges that don't actually belong to us. When we adopt savior-like ambitions for ourselves – either personally or collectively – we hurt ourselves, we hurt others, and we hurt the mission of Jesus. When we make promises we can't keep – promises of wealth or success, promises of immunity, promises of peace and blessing...then we become stumbling blocks to those who seek comfort in Jesus.

John, however, begins his ministry from a place of humility. He doesn't allow his calling to go to his head. He doesn't claim any identity that doesn't belong to him. He makes no promises to his listeners of ease and comfort; he simply asks them to prepare themselves for the One who is greater than himself.

But just to be clear, this version of self-denial isn't weak or self-gratifying. It doesn't require a denial of John's gifts and abilities. I don't think anyone who studies this prophet's story can call him anything other than strong, confident, and authoritative. But John knows both the source and the purpose of his authority. It's not celebrity status that attracts him, and it certainly isn't religious or political power either. Which is precisely why he carries out his calling in the wilderness, far away from the centers of power and prestige in Jerusalem.

We begin by comprehending who we are not. But as Christians, we can't define ourselves *solely* in the negative – even when it's tempting to do so. I've certainly done it, and perhaps you have, too. "*Oh, I'm not one of those Christians.*" "*I'd never attend a church like that.*" "*I don't read the Bible that way.*" "*The Jesus I believe in has nothing to do with that kind of theology.*"

Many of us feel an ongoing need to define ourselves in the negative, otherwise we fear being tainted by association with the *other* Christians if we don't. And while I certainly understand this desire, and maybe it even has its proper place – but a negative answer to the question of Christian identity isn't a complete answer. It's not a loving, inviting, or hospitable answer either. It's a defensive answer. An answer that constructs walls instead of tearing them down.



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The thing is, “*Who are you?*” is a really big question. It demands something more – it demands an investment beyond just a series of denials and disclaimers. It asks us to engage in hard and honest reflection. It asks us to question what we hold dear, what we trust, what we love – and why. And once we've peeled away everything that we are *not*, then what's left? After we've figured out what we *don't support, don't believe, or don't love* – then what version of faith remains? What do we have that's positive, vibrant, and alive that we'll offer to the world in the name of Jesus?

John's answer to the question is clear and unmistakable – “*I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*” In a world that promises awards to those who promote and inflate themselves, John chooses humility instead – *I am a voice pointing away from myself. I am merely a path maker for feet other than my own. I am a witness speaking on behalf of someone other than myself.*

Now if this doesn't surprise you, then reconsider what you know about the wilderness prophet. This is John the Baptist we're talking about! John, whose very conception calls forth an angelic visit. John, who leapt for joy in his own mother's womb when Jesus, in the womb of Mary, entered the room. John, whose fiery preaching draws huge crowds to repentance. John, who sees the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descend like a dove on the newly baptized Jesus.

This is the man who chooses to define himself as a “voice in the wilderness.” As a prophet “unworthy to untie the thongs” of Jesus's sandals. As no more than a precursor. As a mere witness to divine mystery.

What strikes me most about John's story is that he continues to witness to this mystery even when the mystery completely baffles him. We know from other Gospel accounts that he doesn't always understand his cousin's mission and ministry. We know that he struggles with serious doubts about Jesus during the weeks or months he suffers in prison. We know that he struggles to reconcile his own assumptions about a Messiah of fire, judgment, and justice – with the Jesus who shows up at the Jordan, seeking baptism. A Jesus of tenderness, humility, and unconditional love.

Yet, John stays true to his identity. His answer to the “Who are you?” question never wavers. Even when his vocation leads to his imprisonment, he stays true to the person God calls him to be.

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called “Gaudete Sunday” coming from the Latin words meaning, “everyone rejoice.” In fact, most of the lectionary readings for today emphasize celebration, anticipation, and joy. Which coincidentally seem to be the perfect words for today amid the various struggles going on in so many people's lives and the numerous crises taking place around the world.

And given our Gospel for today, this all feels right to me. We tap into joy when we correctly understand who we are in the kingdom of God. New life and abundant joy spring up when we align our self-understanding to God's calling, and recognize that we, like John, are meant to point away from ourselves, towards Jesus. Joy surprises us when we decide to forge paths in the wilderness, when we make way in difficult places for someone greater than ourselves. Joy multiplies when we dismantle oppression and injustice, and dwell with others in the midst of their suffering, so that all can experience the love of God.

My friends, I wonder what *your* answer is to the question of identity? Who are *you* during this sacred season of preparation? Are you a voice? A witness? A path maker? Are you one who's willing to dwell in your own wilderness and that of others?

Whatever your wilderness looks like, wherever your mountaintop is located...*who are you in that place?* Because very soon, the one we're waiting for this Advent will come, and the question that accompanies him will demand a whole-hearted response, “*Who do you say that I am?*”

Consider the possibility that who *you* are shapes who *he* becomes in your life. The self you cultivate is the self who will receive the Light of the World and make him known to a world that needs him. So, I ask you again, Who are you? Thanks be to God. Amen!