

Third Sunday of Advent  
John 1:19-28  
December 17, 2017

## Who are You?

Last week we encountered John the Baptizer in Mark's Gospel, dressed in a camel's hair coat and munching bugs. His message was clear: "Repent, for God's kingdom is on its way." This week he appears in John's Gospel, none the worse for wear, and delivering the same message.

The audience in Mark's Gospel gets the point right away, and streams out of Jerusalem to be baptized. The audience in John's Gospel, however, requires remedial help.

In today's reading, John is mistaken for somebody else – or rather for several somebody else's. He could be the ancient prophet Elijah. After all, he's dressed for the part. Or he could be "the prophet." (Which prophet the text doesn't say. Take your choice.)

Or he could be the Messiah himself – the anointed one. In Greek, the Christ – the fulfilment of ancient longing, the one who will bring in God's reign of justice and peace. Beneath that camel's hair coat might be a light saber. At any moment, John could pull it out and call upon an army of angels to run Governor Pontius Pilate out of town, taking Rome's forces of occupation with him.

So, which is it? A blast from the past or a blast from God's future? Who exactly, is John?

At first John embarks on the *via negativa*. He tells the credentials committee dispatched by the religious authorities in Jerusalem who he isn't. "I'm not Elijah," he tells them. "I'm not the prophet. And I'm certainly not the Messiah."

That's helpful so far as it goes, but defining yourself by who you are not tells only half the story.

I suspect you know what I mean. How many times have you encountered Christians who make you want to wear a paper bag over your head, for fear of being mistaken for a member of their tribe?

Often a label is invoked. “Evangelical,” for instance. Or “Bible-believing.” When people stick those adjectives in front of the word “Christian,” they trigger a reaction in other people that is not necessarily positive.

Last Tuesday, the voters of Alabama had to decide between two candidates for the United States Senate. One of them was - I might as well say it plainly - a racist, a bigot, and a misogynist who faced credible charges of sexual predation on underage girls. Nevertheless, thousands of self-described “Evangelical Christians” entered the voting booth and marked their ballot for Judge Roy Moore.

Mr. Moore lost, but he was not the only loser. Lost, too, was a good deal of Christian credibility in the public square -- not just the credibility of self-identifying “evangelicals” but the credibility of all Christians, regardless of label.

The editor of *Christianity Today*, a solidly conservative publication founded by Billy Graham 61 years ago, put it best. In anticipation of last Tuesday’s vote, Mark Galli wrote:

[Whatever the results of this election] “. . . there is already one loser: Christian faith. No one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation. Christianity’s integrity is severely tarnished.”

If you tell folks you’re a Christian and you’re voting for a child-molesting bigot because he will uphold Christian values, it’s hard to get folks to take you seriously when you tell them that God loves the world.

“Who are you?” John’s inquisitors asked. “Well, I’m not Elijah. And I’m not the prophet. And I’m not the Messiah.”

“Who are you?” the world asks you and me. Surely, we must do better than to reply, “We’re not *that kind* of Christian.”

John’s testimony turns from negative to positive in an unexpected way. He does say who he is, but he does it by quoting scripture.

“I’m a voice,” he says. **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”**

So, beloved, here’s an assignment for you on this Third Sunday of Advent.

Imagine for a moment that you are standing in John’s shoes right now. Better still, imagine that you are John standing in the River Jordan without any shoes. The mud is squishing up through your toes. The sun is beaming down on your back. Just as you are coming up out of the water, someone on the bank asks you, **“Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”**

What verse from scripture would you choose as your reply?

Are you, like John, a voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord?” Are you the kind of person who points away from yourself and toward the Lord whom you claim to serve?

Can people look at you and the way you live your life and say, “That person is pointing to Jesus. I can see it in the way she talks to her neighbors, in the way she welcomes the children sitting next to her in the pew, in the way she spends her money at Christmas time. I can even see her pointing to Jesus in her politics.

If that’s you, you could quote Isaiah also.

Or maybe that verse from Isaiah isn’t you. Maybe a verse from Mary’s Magnificat describes you better. Remember how Mary pointed to the child in her womb and sang out,

**. . . the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name  
he has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.**

Perhaps that's your testimony, too, as you have watched proud men in high places tumble from their perches, due to brave women telling the truth about sexual harassment in the workplace.

Maybe you think God had a hand in bringing down those powerful men from their thrones. I certainly do. Maybe, the next time you hear Mary's Magnificat, you will join in, singing, "Me, too."

**Who are you? What do you say about yourself?** With scripture in mind, where do you stand?

- Do you stand with the poor who can't raise a family on the minimum wage?
- Do you stand with the rich who will benefit most from the pending tax cuts?
- Do you stand with parents whose children will lose their medical coverage when the Children's Health Insurance Program runs out of money in dozens of states early next year?
- Do you stand with those who call themselves "Christian," but point to a Christ who is all but unrecognizable in the light of the Bible they claim to believe?

These days it's not enough to be a Christian who dares to say, "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays."

It's not enough to show the world who we are not. Like John, we have to show the world who we are.

And if we don't? Well, the editor of *Christianity Today* will be right: No one will believe a word we say.

Who are you? To whom are you pointing? Looking at your life, will anybody believe a word you say?

The kingdom is at hand, beloved. Who are you?