

SERMON

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – YEAR B

“WHO ARE YOU?”

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28 / DECEMBER 17, 2017

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Several decades ago, the television show, “All in the Family” poked fun at the bigots of America through the lead bigot, Archie Bunker. In one episode, Archie tells his wife Edith that he wants to be on the bowling team so bad that he can taste it. He describes the bowling shirts that the ‘cannonballers’ wore: all yellow silk, with bright red stripes on the collar and sleeves.

And on the back, there’s a picture of a cannon firing a bowling ball at a set of pins. Archie says, “when you got something like that on your back, Edith, you know you’re somebody! (Raymond Gibson, *Minister’s Annual – Abingdon, 1987. Ed. By Jim & Doris Morentz*)

That episode was a satirical look at how Archie could gain a sense of identity and importance from being a part of a bowling team and wearing a gaudy shirt. But that story raises the questions, “Who are you? What is the source of your identity? How should your sense of who you are before God as a Christian shape how you live and what you do?”

“Who are you?” That’s the question asked of John the Baptist by his interrogators. And interrogators is an apt description of the religious leaders

who questioned him. Who are you? The gospel reading for today encourages us to wrestle with that question.

It suggests that there are two ways of approaching life and God's presence in the world, which in turn suggests how we answer the question of who we are. One way is demonstrated by John. The other way is demonstrated by the priests and Levites. We are either witnesses or interrogators.

John was a witness sent from God. The priests and Levites were interrogators sent by the religious authorities. "Who are you?" they ask John. "Are you Elijah?" they ask. "Are you the prophet?"

Here they are likely referring to Moses. In other words, they interrogate him: "Are you saying, John, that you are like Elijah and Moses?"

They are insinuating that John is claiming that he has the authority of God like these two leading figures in Hebrew scripture. "Why are *you* baptizing anyone John?" – "you of all people". They are interrogators. They are in the dark about John's identity. They don't like being in the dark, not knowing what they're dealing with; not wanting to have anyone potentially undermine their authority.

Witnesses, on the other hand, are different. Witnesses say what they have seen and heard or attest to the truth of another's testimony. We are told that John witnesses to the light. His role is to recognize the true light when it appears and to call attention to it so that others may recognize it and believe – that is, recognize, trust in, and commit themselves to the light.

John knows who he is and who he is not. He claims for himself neither too much nor too little. He speaks the truth but he is not the truth. He is illumined but he is not the light. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, but he is not, himself, the word of God. Everything about John points to the light and the life of the one we know as Christ.

The real difference between witnesses and interrogators is this: interrogators demand answers, command certainty; they want control at all costs. Witnesses offer hope. More than ever our world today needs witnesses of hope. We do not need more answers or explanations. We have enough interrogators. We need to hear the “voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of God.”

John is the voice of hope. His words echo through the wilderness of our world and our lives. John's was not the first voice of hope. Before John, Mary -- Jesus' mother -- was proclaiming the greatness of God. In what we have come to call 'The Magnificat' or 'The Song of Mary' she spoke of God as showing favour to the lowly, offering mercy, and lending the strength of God's arm. She proclaimed that God fills the hungry with good things and comes to the help of the people.

Before Mary, there was Isaiah. God anointed him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. He spoke about God comforting those who mourn and rebuilding the ruins of their lives. John, Mary, Isaiah and many others in the biblical tradition were witnesses of hope. They

examined the circumstances of their lives and world and saw a greater, better reality. They each testify to a life and presence beyond their own. Within each of their voices is the word that was in the beginning – the word that was with God and was God, the word that became flesh and dwells among us, the word that enables us to become children of God, the word that is our ultimate hope.

Think about the tragedies and difficulties of your life: the death of a loved one, an illness, an addiction, a divorce, guilt, the sin that separates us from God, from others, from ourselves. Answers and explanations did not sustain you. How, what, when, or why was not what you needed to hear. It was the word of hope that got you through it all. Hope doesn't make life easy. It makes life possible and new life a reality to which we move toward. Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. It is already here among us. The interrogators of the world, however, make it difficult to hear that other voice, the witness of hope. The interrogators clamour and compete for our attention. They often speak the loudest but the voice of hope has never been silenced.

Which voice do we listen to? Which voice do we follow? Which voice shapes our identity, determines who we are?

The reality of human life is that we are, often, a people of the wilderness. The reality of God is that God is the God of hope. Do we trust the voice of the wilderness or do we trust the voice of one crying out in the wilderness?

The voice we listen to is the voice with which we will speak. We will become either witnesses or interrogators.

Hope is not easy. We must practice hope. As Paul wrote in one of his letters, "...we rejoice always; we pray without ceasing; we give thanks in all circumstances." These practices enable us to both hear and become the voice of hope.

Interrogators will look at and question the circumstances of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. Are the circumstances right for rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks? Is there reason enough for these things? They want answers, explanations, justifications. Witnesses, however, look beyond the circumstances to the God who fills those circumstances. There is hope.

It opens our eyes to see the one who is coming. It prepares our heart to welcome the one who is already among us. It makes straight the way of God. Hope is not a feeling but an orientation and attitude of our life. It is a way of seeing. It allows us to recognize and know the Christ in our midst. Hope does not change the circumstances of life; it changes us and that changes everything.

This gospel text instructs us to ask the question asked of John, "Who are you?" "Who am I?" "Who are we?" How do we identify ourselves in the world – sometimes over against how the world would identify us. Our answer to that question; our sense of self; our identity should relate to our lives as people of faith.

I was reminded of this recently when my sister told me of a conversation she had with a long-time friend with whom she had reconnected. This friend recalled the time when I was about five or six years old. For a short period of time, less than a year, my family moved from southern Ontario to live in White Rock, British Columbia. While there we attended a local church, which happened to be Presbyterian. Upon returning to southern Ontario to once again take up residence, my sister's friend happened to be visiting and she said to me, "Well, Bobby, you must be a little British Columbian by now." And I responded, perhaps somewhat precociously, "No – I'm a Presbyterian!"

"Who are we?" How does our faith shape our identity? I believe the answer to that question is that we are witnesses. We are, like John, to witness to, to testify to the light.

In this season of advent, this season of waiting for the light, our game plan should be to prepare for the coming of Jesus by testifying to the light so that others might believe through us. Now I'm not suggesting that we wear, like John, camel hair coats. Cashmere, or even ordinary wool, will do. And I'm not suggesting that like John, we eat locusts and honey, although our diets could probably use a little attention after the holidays. But I am suggesting that we, as disciples of Christ, be witnesses...that, like John, we testify to the light, so that others might believe through us.

"How can we do that?" you might ask. Well, we could begin by telling others about this wonderful community and how we care for one another so

that we can care for others. We could actually add the word, “God” to our secular vocabularies and use it from time to time to communicate that God is part of our lives. We could even talk about the difference faith makes in our lives.

If you’re not quite ready for that yet, you might consider letting people know who you are by the way you live your lives, the way you treat others, all others. In other words, if you’re not comfortable preaching the gospel, you can simply live it.

That means, in the words of Isaiah, “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, to comfort those who mourn” and in the words of Jesus “to love our neighbours as ourselves” – those neighbours being anyone and everyone who needs our help – even our enemies – as Jesus taught us. Such a way of life may well involve us in the messiness and chaos of life.

It is the willingness to live as witnesses to Christ, to be people of justice; people of hope, peace, joy, and love – the catchwords of the advent season -- that pitches us into the places in people’s lives and the life of the world that are marked by disruption, despair, and hopelessness. But as educator, Henry Brooks Adams, once noted, “Chaos often breeds life; when order breeds habit.” We want to be witnesses; not interrogators.

We are not the light, but we testify to the light; we are not the light but we are illumined by the light – a light that makes brighter our daily living, that shines God’s indescribable and numerous blessings upon us so that we

might reflect that light for the well being of others. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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