

Sermon on Advent 3, 2017
John 1:6-8, 19-28
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“Who do you think you are?”

That’s what they asked John the Baptist, when he showed up proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. “Who do you think you are?”

And that’s a good question, because John – the wilderness guy, dressed in strange clothes and eating locusts – didn’t appear to have any authority to be doing and saying the things he was. As Pastor Hansen reminded us last Sunday, he was an outsider – not authorized by the empire, or sanctioned by religious authorities.

But there he was, coming as a witness to testify to the light. A voice crying out in the wilderness, reminding people of those words of promise from Isaiah, saying, “IT’s coming! Good news for the oppressed, and healing for the broken-hearted, and comfort for those who mourn. It’s coming.”

John boldly proclaimed this, but wouldn’t take credit for it. People wanted to know who he was -- Was he Elijah or the prophet? Was he the ancient prophesy being fulfilled, maybe even the Messiah, himself? No. He was simply sent to prepare the way for Jesus, who would do the *real* work.

And of course, John ruffled a lot of feathers, because what he was saying really was a threat to the powers that be.

If someone is about to come and lift up the little people, and fight for the oppressed, and tear down the existing social structures for the sake of the poor and the marginalized – well that sounds like a revolution. And the last thing the powerful want is a revolution on their hands.

So John rightly gets some attention in his neighborhood. But I’ve often wondered why we give so much time in Advent to John – two whole weeks out of four, this year. This dirty, bug-eating side-kick is getting an awful lot of press time this year. Who *does* he think he is, anyway?

My 8th grade confirmation students have been learning about the 5 promises we make in baptism, and there’s been so much to talk about that we’re still only talking about number

2. (Which I know does not bode well for getting through all we need to before my maternity leave!)

The second baptismal promise is, “To hear the Word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper.” So we’ve talking about this “Word of God” – the Bible. And these kids are the best disciples I know. They ask hard questions. They are not interested in simply reciting what they’re taught or mindlessly accepting whatever their parents or Sunday School teachers or pastors have said. They want to understand this Word of God, and really figure out what it might mean for their own lives of faith.

And as we have been wrestling with the Bible together, we’ve been talking about what it *is*, and what it *isn’t*.

It isn’t merely a book of history. It isn’t a collection of legends or fairy tales. It isn’t distant and ancient and out-of-touch. No, the Bible is the Living Word of God. And so in ways that are new and relevant every day, the Bible shows us who God is. In stories of faithfulness and rescue and healing.

But not only that – the Bible also teaches us who *we* are.

And so, when we meet the woman at the well, we learn that *we* are valuable, even though we are broken; and that God accepts us when others are judging us.

When we meet the prodigal son we learn that *we* are forgiven even when we don’t deserve it.

When we meet the thieves on their crosses next to Jesus, we learn that God will never abandon us -- even when we’ve messed up and there appears to be no way out.

We learn from shepherds and fisherman that God chooses simple, humble people to do the holiest work.

And Jonah teaches us that even people who refuse to listen to God, and who try to turn and run away – the most stubborn of us – will never run ourselves outside of God’s love.

I could go on...

In Advent, in 2017, as we wait for God to come into *this* world and make all things new – John the Baptist reminds us, too, who we are called to be.

We are the voices, crying out in the wilderness. Crying – for the oppressed, for the broken-hearted, for the imprisoned, for the least and the lost. Crying out for their release and pointing to the way of Jesus.

It's not always a popular voice. John will be scoffed at and gas-lighted and persecuted. Those who break silence often are, as we know. After all, who do they think they are? Stirring the pot and causing all of trouble.

When we use our voices to cry out on behalf of those who need justice, we might be asked that same question: "Who do you think *you* are?"

And like John, there are names and labels that will be given to us by others. Names that hurt and accuse and shame. But the Word of God reminds us who we *really* are.

We are God's children. We are chosen and forgiven and loved. And we were created us to be caretakers of this world, and of one another. We must never forget that God called us "good," and gave us voices and gifts that are meant to be used to testify to the light.

I know. Sometimes it feels like that's too much to ask. When we look at the enormity of issues in the world, we might be tempted to think we can't possibly do enough to make a difference.

We might wonder, "What difference does it make...if I recycle, or if I give away this measly portion of my salary, or if I cast my one little vote?"

Who do we think we are, anyway? How could *we* make a difference? And it's true: We are not the light. We are not the savior. But we are Holy Sidekicks, like John, chosen to prepare the way. To shine our little lights.

And every small voice crying, breaking the silence, matters.

You know, the favorite thing for the kids in our Child Development Center to sing each week is the verse that goes: "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine!"

They love to yell, "No!" And I think we need to do the same, every time we're tempted to hide our light. Every time we are tempted to diminish our own gifts and our own voice, we need to fight that temptation. Because God has created us to care for the earth and one another - to proclaim the good news of Christ for all people.

Who do you think you are?

You are the anointed ones, sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn.

Let your light so shine. Amen.