

The Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2020

The Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
 Psalm 126
 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
 John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Hymns: # 354 (1,2,4) *Arise, O Christian People*
 # 345 (1-3) *Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding*
 # 349 (1-4) *Hark the Glad Sound*

The Collect: Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:
 "Who is He?"
 John 1:6-8, 19-28

"He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

1. The Voice and the Word by the Jordan River

Who is he? And who isn't he? That's what the Pharisees want to know.

When they look at John the Baptist, they see a preacher who draws big crowds. He's dressed up to resemble Elijah. He's on a wilderness diet of locusts and wild honey. He's in the wilderness across the Jordan, as if he's looking to lead people into a promised land. Despite the inconvenient location, he's drawing big crowds; and to all who gather, he's preaching and baptizing for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Who is he? Is he Elijah, back from heaven? Is he the Prophet, long-awaited since Moses spoke of him centuries before? Could he be...the Christ Himself?

All this speculation isn't helping, so the Pharisees send priests and Levites to try to pin him down. "Who are you?" they ask, and he answers, "I am not the Christ." John wants to make that clear right away: the fact that he's not the Messiah is more important than who he is.

But that's not good enough for his interrogators: "What then? Are you Elijah?" Elijah had been taken to heaven alive in a whirlwind and many expected that he would return. But John says: "I am not". "Are you the Prophet?" – the greater one prophesied by Moses. Again, John says no. "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us?" they demand. "What do you say about yourself?"

John replies: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."

Note the answer, and note it well. For one thing, although they asked, “What do you say about yourself,” John doesn’t say what he says about himself; he says what God says about him. That’s what’s important. And then finally, John identifies with God’s Word who he is: he’s “the voice”.

Big deal? Very much so, for it tells us who John is and who he isn’t. He’s the voice—the sound. He’s not the content—that belongs to God. In other words, when John speaks, he speaks God’s Word, not his own. That is what matters. John’s a voice, but it’s the Lord who gives the Word to speak. John is a pair of hands applying water, but it’s the Lord who gives forgiveness through the Baptism.

The rest of the Gospel lesson makes this clear: John is “sent from God,” says verse 6: he’s sent like an apostle is sent, like an ambassador is dispatched by a king. He’s there to speak God’s Word. He’s there to prepare the way for the Savior. He’s just there to be the voice. He will voice the Word of God to point to the Word made flesh.

John makes it a big deal about who he’s not, because **he’s** not the big deal at all. However, unlike an ambassador in a foreign land, John isn’t speaking for a king far away. Verse 26 is astounding: “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.” There stands One among you. Even as the Pharisees’ men ask John if he is the Christ, the Christ is standing there in the crowd. Jesus is present, right there. The Savior has arrived.

And notice two things about the Savior, Jesus. First, He’s completely unremarkable. The holy, incarnate Son of God is standing in the crowd, and no one notices Him. This is in keeping with the prophecy of Isaiah, “He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him” (Is. 53:2). Imagine! Everyone’s looking for the Savior, and nobody notices that He’s there. It is an important lesson for us today: you don’t find Jesus in what you see. You find Him by what you hear—you find Him by hearing His Word.

Second, Jesus allows John to keep preaching. As the Christ, the Word made flesh, it would make sense that Jesus would have John step aside and take over the sermons from there. And while Jesus will preach His share of sermons through His own mouth, He often works through means. He uses John to speak His Word, and John rejoices in the privilege. He will use the disciples as His instruments, too. He still uses His people as His instruments today.

But even while Jesus remains unnoticed in the crowds by the Jordan, make no mistake: He’s the real deal, and John the Baptist isn’t worthy even to untie His shoes.

2. Who You Are, and Whose You Are

One day a seminary student sat in a professor’s office, less than happy. He was taking a class on Christology — an in-depth study of Jesus, and had come to this office to discuss his paper. Each student had been assigned a name for Jesus, and each was to report back to the class. At this level, it was a challenging assignment, and he had come to speak to the professor for help. The prof was perched up on a stool above the student, eyes closed, and spoke for several minutes, a stream-of-consciousness gathering of hints, clues and observations to get him thinking. But the student felt disconnected. He wasn’t sure if the prof even knew he was in the room. Finally, the prof opened his eyes, stared directly at the student and asked, “What is your name?”

Obviously, the student thought he had made no impression whatsoever in class. He stammered out his name: "John Smith." There was a pause, then the prof laughed. Eyes twinkling, he said, "No, no, no! What's the name of Jesus that you'll be reporting on? One name is far more important than the other!"

It's good to know who you are, and who you're not. "Know thyself:" that's been a command of philosophers for a long time. But here's the question: how will you know who you are? Who is going to have the say as to who you are? You? The devil, the world and your own sinful flesh?

Those are the usual suspects, so beware: they want to give you the identity of one who is damned forever.

Some will seek to tell you who you are by beating you to a fine powder. This is the work of the bully, whether it be the form of the sixth-grade boy or the verbally-abusive mother. There will be those in life who seek to define you by every failure you suffer, every weakness you display, every mistake you make. There will be circumstances in your life that make you vulnerable to these accusations. There will be those who want you beaten down until you say, "I know who I am. I am a complete, abject failure. I am someone who cannot be loved. I am someone who doesn't matter at all."

Your Old Adam will happily join in on the piling on: you see, if you believe that you are completely hopeless, then you'll easily reject the hope of forgiveness and life in Christ. Likewise, the devil delights when you despair, as long as it does not lead you to trust in the Savior.

Some will tell you who you are by magnifying your achievements, and your Old Adam will be sure to join in and stroke your pride. You may be tempted to define yourself by your successes and victories. You may be tempted to say, "I am someone because of the things I've achieved, the money I've made, the rewards and recognition I've received." Pride comes easy with such statements, and such pride makes it easy to ignore the need for Jesus and His grace. But beware if this is your identity: wealthy, rewarded achievers still die. If their identity is in their work, they still go to hell.

Mostly, people and circumstances will try to define you somewhere in between: you're a pretty good person who's just trying to get your work done, get your children to turn out half-decent, and who's trying to be good to others. You're not perfect, but you're not that bad, either.

But be careful here too, because the devil loves this one. You see, if you're not that bad, then you're really not all that sinful. You're good enough, and that's good enough. Except it's not. Only "sinless" is good enough for eternal life.

So, who are you? Don't let the devil, the world or your own sinful flesh tell you who you are. It is the Lord who created you, who formed you in the womb; and it is He who declares who you are.

First off, yes: you're a sinner. Born sinful, you commit actual sins of thought, word and deed. Your sin makes you unholy, unrighteous and deserving of God's judgment. It also makes you vulnerable to the wages of sin. You will make mistakes. You will hurt other people. You will fail. You'll get sick and hurt. And you'll die. That's what God says of you in His Law: therefore, to say, "I'm good enough as I am"

simply isn't true. It might be psychologically good, but it's theologically false and leads to eternal death.

That's who God says you are according to His Law. But God doesn't stop talking about you there.

We've still got His Gospel to go. Because the Lord declares this: you have great worth. In fact, you are priceless. How can this be?

Because of Jesus. You are of such great value to the Lord that He has purchased and won you from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death. Jesus Christ loves you so much that He has died your death and suffered your hell on the cross in order to redeem you for eternal life. For His sake, God the Father looks upon you and says, "Once, you were My enemy. Now you're My beloved child, because My Son has paid with His life to make you so." How much are you worth to God? So much that He's given His Son to make you His own.

Furthermore, the Lord doesn't stop defining you there. You are one so precious that He is very near you. As Jesus stood among those at the Jordan, so He is among you. And as He appeared unremarkable there, He is present with you, unnoticed by eyes, in His means of grace. He is not one who says, "I've done enough that I'll remain in heaven and hope they find me." No, He who has died for all the world, makes sure to be with you. At your Baptism, He said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The pastor was just the voice and the hands: it was Jesus doing the saving there. In the Absolution, Jesus says, "I forgive you all of your sins." Again: pastor's voice, it's Jesus' Word. And in Holy Communion, Jesus gives you—personally!—His body and blood for the forgiveness of sin, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. And again: pastor's voice and hands, Jesus' body and blood.

Do you see how treasured you are? So much so that Jesus, who died and rose for you, still attends to you today.

And there's more: as the Lord has made you His beloved child, so He also uses **you** as His instruments -- as His voice and hands. As the called and ordained servant of the Word, the pastor publicly preaches and administers the Sacraments: his voice and hands, Jesus' work.

But in your vocations, you have the honor, too. In a world where enemies are often silenced, Jesus has first turned you from enemy to beloved child and now gives you the privilege of speaking His Word. You have the honor of singing His praises here. You have the privilege of reading Bible stories to your children or grandchildren. You have the joy of speaking His saving Word to your neighbors and friends. Furthermore, as the Lord gives you the privilege of speaking, so also the privilege of doing. A farmer is the Lord's instrument for growing food, while a grocer is His tool for distributing daily bread. A doctor is the Lord's instrument for treating disease. So it goes. God gives you the privilege of caring for those around you.

That is who you are, because of whose you are. Watch out for Old Adam and his tricks. With the Lord remaining present but unnoticed, your sinful nature will try to convince you that He really isn't there

and really doesn't care; or else that you're the one who really matters, since it's your voice and your hands that you see.

No. Your position and your delight is this: it is God who says who you are. Though you were once a sinner, you are now redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus. You were bought with the price of Jesus' own blood. You have the hope of heaven; and in the meantime, you have the honor of being the Lord's instrument, His voice and hands, in the vocations that He gives you.

As long as you're in this sinful world, there will be setbacks and sins, mistakes and failings. Confess them and give thanks in this: this world does not have the final say in who you are. The Devil doesn't have the final say. God does! And that is why, while it is a great privilege to be the Lord's mouth and hands, it is even better that He has made you ears: ears that hear that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.