First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

Who Are You?

12/17/23

John 1:19-28 - NRSV

**19**This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” **20**He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” **21**And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” **22**Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” **23**He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. **24**Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. **25**They asked him, “Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” **26**John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, **27**the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal.” **28**This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

I’ve been thinking about identity quite a bit lately, specifically my own identity, and how I’m the sum total of all the different things that make me who I am. That list includes the fact that I’m a son, a brother, an uncle, a Christian, a pastor, a partner, a musician, a friend. And it also includes the fact that I stand 6 foot 4 inches tall, have blue eyes and gray hair, the fact that I wear glasses, was born with a cleft condition and the fact that I’m struggling to quit smoking. This list is by no means exhaustive, but you get the point. All of these attributes contribute to not only how I define myself, but how others see and define me, as well, and that’s true for all of us. Each of us are defined, at some point or another, by some or all of the individual attributes that we are made up of, whether we like it or not. So today, we’re talking about identity.

On this third Sunday of Advent, the lectionary includes a reading from the Gospel according to John. This passage basically tells us the same story we heard in Mark’s gospel, last week, but with a slightly different focus. Where Mark’s focus is centered on the fulfillment of a part of Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah, the writer of Johns’ Gospel, focuses more on the person of John the Baptist.

Before I go on, let me clarify that the author of the Gospel of John was not John the Baptist. I mention this because the name John was fairly common, and it can get kind of confusing as to which John we’re talking about, when it comes to this particular reading.

With that said, last week I spoke about the humility that John the Baptist exhibited, and his understanding of his place in the overarching narrative of Jesus’ ministry. Remember, that John the Baptist was a celebrity. People flocked to the Jordan River from all over Judah, and even Jerusalem, to be baptized by him. He was the equivalent of a popular televangelist, and he certainly could have let his popularity go right to his head. But, unlike some of the popular televangelists and megachurch pastors out there today, John chose a different path. Instead of letting his fame distract him from his mission, John chooses humility, and that is certainly evident in this reading, as he deals with the priests and Levites sent out to figure out what the heck was going on.

Given the fact that John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah, a member of the tribe of Aaron and a temple priest, it’s very likely that the folks sent out by the Pharisees, to see what all the commotion was about, would have known, or at the very least, know *about* John the son of Zechariah. That knowledge didn’t prevent these priests and Levites from asking a whole bunch of questions, though. All of the questions center on his identity, and John the Baptist answers most of them by saying who he is not. “I am not the Messiah,” “I am not Elijah,” “I am not the Prophet.” Then, who the heck are you? Give us a straight answer that we can take back to those that sent us, the frustrated priests and Levites asked.

John finally relents and responds that he is…*“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.* Not satisfied with this answer, the folks sent out by the Pharisees, go on the offense. “Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” Now, this was a fairly serious accusation, as John the Baptist was not authorized to preform baptism, or the mikveh, the cleansing ritual that is part of Jewish law. John brushes aside the condemnation and responds that, “*I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,**the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal.”* The reading then ends, rather abruptly, with the author of John’s Gospel noting that all of this took place at Bethany, across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

All of these questions regarding John the Baptist’s identity leads me to wonder who are we in this story? Are we John the Baptist, willing to put our own ego aside, realizing that someone greater than ourselves is about to appear? Or are we the priests and the Levites, unwilling to see what’s right in front of us?

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that the people of Jesus’ time had to overcome, was the popular idea that the Messiah would appear as a Soldier/King, ready to lead the people to victory over the Roman occupation. No one expected the Messiah to appear as a lowly child born in a manger, yet that’s exactly what happened.

Of course, we have the benefit of 2,000 years of hindsight, but if we had been around at the time of Jesus’ birth, would we have recognized Jesus for who he was? Would we have been willing to humble ourselves enough to let go of our preconceived notions of who the Messiah was supposed to look like and how he was to arrive on the scene? Would we have been willing to humble ourselves enough to accept the fact that the Savior, the one greater than us, had actually arrived in such a poor state? Hard to say, really.

In a way, I believe we twenty-first century Christians have fallen into the same trap that plagued the first century citizens of Israel, when it comes to looking for the arrival of the Messiah. We understand, of course, that the lowly birth of Jesus heralded the arrival of the Son of God, but because that event happened in the distant past, many of us instead tend to focus on the glorious day when Jesus returns. That day when, as the old hymn puts it, Jesus comes with clouds descending. That day when Jesus returns in triumph and glory to reign over the earth. That’s a great image, but what if we are ignoring what’s right in front of us, just as the priests and Levites did? What if Jesus has already returned? What if Jesus already walks among us?

I love this quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian from the mid-twentieth century, who writes, *“He comes in the form of a beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbor…”*

If Bonhoeffer is correct, as I believe he is, where does that leave us? We all share the identity of Christians, but are we ready to put aside our preconceived notions and consider the fact that Jesus is already here? Are we able to see what’s right in front of us, letting go of the idea that the Kingdom of God is something that occurs only in some distant future?

To my way of thinking, the idea that Christ walks among us today, in the form of a beggar,or in the persona of child dressed in ragged clothes, or in the presence of anyone who is marginalized, or considered less than, by our society, is much more compelling than the idea that someday the heavens will open up, and Jesus will come back in glory. That may indeed happen, at some point, but my Christian identity compels me to not ignore the possibility that Christ is walking among us this very day.

Do we have the humility to consider that someone greater than ourselves walks the earth right now? Are we willing to put aside our ideas about how the Savior will return and see his face in those we meet? Here’s the thing. Do we have the faith and the courage to accept our part in the overarching narrative of Jesus’ ministry, and are we willing to take the necessary steps and do the required work, to bring about the Kingdom of God, right here and right now? If not, then who are we? AMEN