

Sermon: Who I am Not

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Our Old Testament reading for third Advent Sunday morning is from Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. This historical text comes from third Isaiah (56-66), speaking to the earliest Israelites who are coming back from the Babylonian Exile. While nothing is as hoped, Lord promises good news to God's anointed. Here now the God's Holy Word.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display God's glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. 8 For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for the Lord has clothed me with the garments of salvation, the Lord has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Today's Gospel reading comes from John 1:6-8, 19-28. John the disciple of Jesus, the author of Gospel of John and Revelations is not interested in telling others about what Jesus did. Rather, he is focus on who Jesus is, the divine. Through the testimony of John the Baptist, we are given an opportunity to understand our role as those who are called by God. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 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 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 thong of his sandal." 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Today, we celebrate and worship together the third Sunday of Advent. We are already halfway through the season of Advent and time seems to be moving at a ridiculously fast pace. Year 2020 has only three weeks left, and the entire year feels like it has passed by way too quickly. As we try to recall of the things that took place from earlier this year, it feels like we are looking into a rearview mirror while traveling down a highway.

So, I would like to invite all of us to slow down and take a moment to reflect on what took place for you this year and think about how you would retell your pandemic experience to those who will come after us. What disappointment, despair, anxiety, and fears have you experienced?

But the greater question for all of us to consider is what are some memorable moments, experiences, or something you witnessed that you could name as you look back on this year? Although it may seem like a lifetime ago, Kenya mission team was commissioned and sent out by this congregation in mid-January to extend our love of Christ to start the year! The team was sharing what we witnessed and was testifying our experience to the congregation before the pandemic took a hold of our lives.

Today's gospel of John message is also about witnessing and testifying by John the Baptist speaking about who Jesus is in his life. The setting of this story has always been fascinating to me, as John the evangelist (one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, whom Jesus loved¹) is writing about John the Baptist, who received the greatest accolade by being named the greatest born to woman² according to Jesus. What stood out to me is that Apostle John used negations to describe John the Baptist.

I am not the Messiah (John 1:20)

I am not [Elijah] (v.21)

I am not [the prophet] (v.22)

but uses Isaiah passage describe his purpose of life,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” (v.23)

Then once again uses negation to distinguish who he is in comparison to Jesus, who is to come.

“I baptize with water. Among you stands on whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” (v.27)

This caught my attention because John the disciple is known for 7 famous “I am” identifiers to describe Jesus and establishing Christology:

¹ John 21:20

² Matthew 11:11, Luke 7:28

I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35)
I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
I am the Door (John 10:9)
I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)
I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)
I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

The world that we live in teaches and mold us that we gain our identify by knowing who we are and where we come from. Through our defined personal identity, one can exude positive self-esteem, worth, and confidence to compete with others. But the greatest human being that was born – John the Baptist – was honest and was reflective of who he was not to display his self-awareness and identity prior to highlighting and testifying who Jesus was in his life.

All this started with a crucial question that was given by the priests and Levites to John the Baptist, asking “Who are you?” Utilizing spiritual imagination and John’s example as a model to give our witness testimony of how Jesus is and has been working in our lives during year 2020, the question to ask ourselves is “Who I am Not.” Here are my top three.

- 1) I am not alone. God said, “I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you.”³ Jesus promised “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”⁴ We joyfully wait for Christmas morn because “God destined us for adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ,” to belong to a spiritual family of God.⁵
- 2) I am not determined by what I have. Some of us have lost things or someone during this pandemic, but such a loss does not define you. Our faith tells us that everything we have – from worldly material possessions to our skills & talent from God. We confess all the heaven and earth belong to the Lord, including ourselves. 1 John 3:1 tells us “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”
- 3) I am not at my best. Let’s be honest and reflective. This year has been a tiring year. Everything was unusual, it was the outside of the norm pattern of life that we planned, expected, and should have had. Majority of decisions seemed like heavy decisions because it could have impacted someone’s life. Who would thought we needed to do a risk assessment to go get groceries earlier this year? Even though we are full of fear, anxiety, and grumpiness, through God’s grace, love, and mercy, we have made it. We were able to see the blessings that were around us more clearly,

³ Joshua 1:5

⁴ Matthew 28:20

⁵ Ephesians 1:5

noticing things that we took for granted, and saw that we were surrounded by the fingerprints of God.

Borrowing our Isaiah 61 passage, we are God's anointed, to be a carrier of good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... to comfort all who mourn... to display God's glory.

Friends, as the winter solstice approaches and the darkness will cover the earth the longest in year 2020, let us be like the moon. Although the moon does not have its own light, it reflects the Sun's radiance to give light in the darkness. Likewise, let us be like moon and John the Baptist and testify to the light, reflecting God's marvelous light in the darkness, shining God's love in the heart of every person whom we care and love. Then perhaps our 2020 will be remembered as the year Christmas shined brighter and glorious. Amen.