

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.17.17

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The hardest question to answer these days, I think, is one we hear a lot in this sanctuary: I wonder where you are in this story, or what part of the story is about you. It's a question I always have before me, as I head out into the world, which seems to spin ever faster on its axis these days, as the happenings of the world unfurl so fast and I try to keep up but can do so only cursorily: I wonder where I am in this story, or what part of this story is about me. What should I respond to? What am I in reaction to? What should I ignore, or leave alone, or trust to someone else's care? What's my business, and what isn't?

I look with some envy to John. He seems to have known who he was, where he was in the story, and what part of the story was about him.

We're dealing with two Johns this morning, I should say, John the gospel writer and John the witness or the voice. But I mean to talk about John the witness, John the voice. He's elsewhere called John the baptizer, as in Mark's gospel, or John the Baptist, as in Matthew's, or John son of Zechariah, by which Luke introduces him. In John's gospel, he is the one who "came as a witness to testify to the light," and, to be clear, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

John: for someone who could be understood, and still can be understood, in myriad ways, he had firm self-understanding. "I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not a prophet. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

It's all even more striking when you consider this is the gospel of "I am..." statements. In this gospel narrative, Jesus in particular is remembered to have said of himself many things in terms of "I am..." "I am the good shepherd," "I am the living water," "I am the true vine," "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." These all make use of the Greek phrase *ego eimi* and they recall the Lord's first self-disclosure, and self-naming, before Moses.

Remember?

Moses had asked the voice, the bush, the ground on which he stood though now barefoot because he'd been ordered it was sacred ground; he'd asked, "Who are you and whom shall I say sent me?" And then came the answer, "I am... Tell them, 'I Am sent me...'"

But of course, right? Because this bush, though burning, was never consumed—and so was the very picture of being at its essence, being at no cost to or of another's being. So of course! "I am..." In reference to nothing else, at the expense of nothing else, but self-sustaining, self-creating: "I am..."

Moses had been impertinent to ask. After all, to know someone's name is to have power over that someone, which has high stakes indeed when that someone is a god. To know a god's name, then, is to have power over that god, which has stakes all the higher when it comes to *the* God, the Living God, the Lord. To know *that* god's name, to be able to call upon *the Lord* God, to be able to position your own being in relation to that which *is being* ("I am..."): this is powerful stuff.

It's mitigated, I suppose, by the fact that the name itself is unpronounceable. In Hebrew: Y-H-W-H. Just try to say that: "YHWH." It's breath. Air. Spirit. Only in translation are we given something to wrap our mouths around, and therefore our minds: "I am that I am," "I am that which is," "I am that I will be," or for short "I am."

That Jesus would use this essential naming to understand himself and to reveal to others himself, that he would use this disclosure of God to teach and to offer himself: this is the very thing John's gospel means for us to understand and to believe. Jesus is of God. What we see in Jesus is what we're to see of God.

And in this way, Jesus is unique, one of a kind...

...which is a secondary thing John's gospel means for us to understand, and moreover the character John, the witness and voice *within* John's gospel, means for us to understand—secondary though still crucial. John, according to John, for his conviction that Jesus was, and is one of kind, then crucially understood himself at least partly as different from that, perhaps even lesser than. Crucially, he understood himself in terms of "I am not..."

Priests and Levites had come to John, having heard that he was testifying to the light, that he was baptizing with water in Bethany across the Jordan. They'd come to find out who he was. So John told them, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "What then?"

Are you Elijah?" which was to say, are you the one whose return to earth is expected and hoped for, as it will restore all things to their once-perfect state? But, no, answered John, "I am not." Finally, he'd make it plain he was not even a prophet.

All these statements, of course, are saturated with significance.

Of then, they reveal what the people were longing for. Of *then*, they reveal what the people perceived as their need. Rooted in their long and storied traditions, those in and around Galilee on the edge of the wilderness looked to their past to be open to their future. But in regard to each of these, John can only say, "I'm not that. I'm not that either."

Of now?

What of now?

What do they mean for *us*?

Last time I preached on this I had to admit that I liked John's ability to defuse a potential rivalry. I mean, as cousins, John and Jesus could have easily fallen into such a thing, this thing that Scripture is full of. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Aaron, Saul and David: scripture is full of such rivalrous relationships, which I think indicates how powerful the potential for rivalry is, and how dangerous a dynamic this can be. Especially in small cultures, in villages or households, when two people are too closely identified to each other, things can even turn deadly. We Goodmans have family friends with twin daughters Jack's age, one of whom is apparently disappearing to an eating disorder. On our last weekend spent together, Jack became close to the pair, Sarah and Megan, and he noticed, "It would suck to Megan's sister. Megan is good at everything." As for Sarah? "She's *almost* as good at everything."

It's the *almost* that kills you.

John, though, managed to resist this pull. By some miracle, by *grace*, John instead managed to recognize the singular greatness of his closest relative, and to be the herald for it. "This little light of mine," we all perhaps learned to sing as children. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!" But just as powerful, it seemed to me last time I preached on this, would it be to sing, "That little light of yours!" Just as powerful, it seemed to me, would be the recognition of, and rejoicing in, the particular light that someone else shines forth. Today, then, as before, notice the light someone else brings that you couldn't bring even if

you tried really hard. Today, recognize the gift of someone else in your life—a gift because it provides what would otherwise be missing.

This morning, though, I notice something else energizing John’s insistence that he was not the Christ, both John the character and John the writer—and it’s this: they both wanted there to be no mistake about who here was as God. Really, they both wanted it to be unmistakably clear to whom the world should look that we might know God.

This is, actually, the singular concern of this whole gospel narrative, a fact its final verse makes clear: “But these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Yes, this is the singular concern, that we *believe* in Jesus—“believe,” a word that appears in verb or noun form over one hundred times in this book, more frequently here than in any other book of the New Testament. And it gets a little irritating, I can recognize. John’s insistence, John’s persistence that we believe in Jesus Christ: it gets to feeling a little doctrinaire, a little too hard a sell for a people all too used to getting marketed to. We’re over it. Quit getting us to buy something you’re more interested in than we are.

His concern isn’t so cynical, though. John’s concern that we imagine God rightly, and that we experience and relate to God rightly: it isn’t a cynical thing on his part. This isn’t about sticking it to the people with whom he disagrees. This isn’t about sticking it to the religious authorities or the Pharisees or “the Jews,” a term he employs to name those who resist his message, though he himself and likely everyone he knew was also a Jew. This is about correcting any number of wrong-headed things that have been asserted about God, and that are yet being asserted about God.

Yes, wrong-headed things are yet being asserted about God.

Perhaps you’ve noticed.

You know where I’m going.

This month’s *Monterey News* included a letter to the editor that someone wrote in response to our rainbow flag and the banner we’ve put up, and to the article I wrote explaining our decision to display these signs and the meaning of these signs. Maybe you’ve read it, maybe you haven’t. Maybe you should, or you might decide it’s not worth your time. I leave that to you. **But I will urge** upon you is the very thing John meant for us to be

mindful of—that Jesus is very God of very God, a creedal confessional that tells us not only what’s essential about Jesus but also what’s essential about God.

To name a few:

Jesus is the Lamb of God, a confession featured in the Gospel of John. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—which is to say he is the lamb whom God offers to the world that we might have our bloodlust satiated with blood spilt, though for the last time. Nevermore, then, can killing, even in the most sacred of settings, be mistaken as the means of salvation. (Take a moment here to think about other ground that’s been deemed “sacred.” Ground Zero, Arlington National Cemetery: places where monumental death happened or where monumental death is memorialized. What a departure, though, that is from the ground Moses heard declared sacred: a place of being sustaining being.) Nevermore, then, can the scapegoat mechanism be understood as anything other than a human impulse for creating community, insiders justified at the cost of those cast out. Nevermore can God be thought to establish life on the happenstance of death. Forever after, God is to be understood in faith by grace as life giving life.

Or here’s another: Jesus is the word of God made flesh, also a profession featured in the Gospel of John. Jesus is the one whose life and being interprets all other words spoken of God. Jesus is *the one* whose living means all other words of God and about God yet continue to speak, continue to fill out in their meaning among us, continue to reveal truth yet unfolding. Just as Jesus didn’t die in the first century, never to be heard from again, so also the word of God didn’t become fixed, halcyon, in its meaning then, or anytime subsequent to then. Nonsense, then, is it to assume that ancient though authorized testimony about God might be a final word, fixed in time and telling. Nonsense, is it—this so-called biblical literalism that is far from literal in that it places a task on language and the written word which is very much of the modern mindset, and which is therefore a wild departure from where the ancient words of scripture originated. In fact, I don’t call it biblical literalism anymore because it’s literally not literal—and if there’s any word in the English language that we should get literally correct, it’s “literal.” So how about we call it American Biblicism? Or Biblical libertinism? Just spit-balling here...

Here’s a third, though less literally drawn from scripture: Jesus is the one who having died yet lives; who having died a most painful death and at a most cutting betrayal

yet returns to say even to those who denied him and fled, “Peace be with you,” a crucial detail insisted upon in the Gospel of John, as he is twice remembered to have said this. “Peace be with you.” Those who ran away: “Peace be with you.” Those who hide now: “Peace be with you.” Those who denied me and stayed mute before the murderous powers and principalities that officiate over ritualized death: “Peace be with you.”

A fourth one, and final one for now: Jesus is the light of the world; Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life—all things Jesus is said to have said about himself in the Gospel of John. This is to say, Jesus is the one whose light all other ways are evaluated, this one whose way is of grace and peace. This way is not necessarily “Christian,” and requires not even a conscious confession Christ. This way might be lived under all sorts of banners and brands, or no such banner or brand. I’ve seen people live by self-giving love who wouldn’t know to call themselves Christ-like, wouldn’t dream of calling themselves “Christian.” But that doesn’t mean they aren’t Christ-like. Jesus isn’t the founder of a new religion. He is a *way*.

Really, if anything this proves the veracity of it all. That “Christian living,” that living out the proof of Christ; that this isn’t simply a matter of personal decision and ironclad willpower: if anything this proves the truth of Christ, not to mention the boundlessness of the Holy Spirit of truth. No, it’s not about willpower and personal knowing: it’s mostly a matter of grace—grace, which knows no bounds, which certainly doesn’t stay within the limitations of human understanding, and less still the bounds of human willpower. That people who’ve heard of Christ can be Christ-like, and people who haven’t often are too: this is proof of Christ’s transcendent truth.

Living out this way, then, is how any of us might enter the kingdom. Trusting this as true—that God is self-giving love—and living this self-giving life: these *are* to come to the Father. Truly, there is no other approach to God than the way of Christ, which (call it what you will) is the way of love. You can’t get to the Father through hating on gays. You can’t get to the Father through slandering immigrants, through romanticizing yourself or your own bloody history (most of us have one), or through dismissing refugees as unworthy of compassion—all impulses of the scapegoat mechanism that is no longer valid, no longer to hold sway. You can only arrive amidst the Father by journeying as with Christ, the one who was crucified that the powers and principalities of the world might tremble. And, yes, it

helps if you've had the chance to learn of this Christ, to study the way that you might more faithfully follow in it. But those who live this way regardless of their having learned that this is "Christian" are no less followers than if they knew it had a name or if they chose that name to call it.

One thing I love about this congregation is that we're not a Talking Points church. We don't all have an agreed-upon thing to say about ourselves. I haven't given you things to recite by rote to explain yourselves as participants of this congregation—at least not until this morning. No, the deaconate or other leadership hasn't settled upon a list of things that you're to take with you as you interact in faith with this world that God so deeply loves and that is not yet complete, is still mired in sin.

Some congregations have them, you know; and you can figure out where on the spectrum of American Christianity they fall based on them. Some congregations even print them on banners and hang them outside their church. "Be the Church," begins one such banner, prepared by our denomination, the United Church of Christ. "Protect the Environment," it goes on. "Care for the poor. Reject racism. Embrace diversity." It's a good list. Many of our UCC neighbors have chosen it for their statement to the world as the world drives by. We didn't, though, because it seemed too wordy, so long that it risked being seen as comprehensive, which this "Christianity," this following Christ, defies. There is no way to sum this thing up. You can't be comprehensive about a faith whose founding statement could well be, "Follow me."

And I like that you all might leave this place on any given Sunday with a clear idea as to what your task is moving forward, but likely little agreement among you all as to what that is. Something I've noticed: churches of the religious right are excited about the Johnson Amendment being repealed. This 1954 law that prohibits churches from endorsing or opposing political candidates at the risk of losing their tax-exempt status: it being repealed: churches on the right are psyched about this! *My* colleagues, though, are as up-in-arms as even the most secular members of society. But we have pulpits, right? And we can declare whom you all should vote for and whom you shouldn't. Repeal the Johnson Amendment, and we can let 'er rip! The problem is you all. The problem is you don't necessarily do what we say. No, you think you can discern for yourselves, you can search your own conscience and pray amongst yourselves. Obedience is hardly the prized thing

here that it is among the religious right; the strong man in the pulpit isn't so seductive a thing to people like you. It's a pain in the neck, I tell you. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

But this means it really is up to you to figure out where you are in this story and what part of this story is about you. And John isn't going to go easy on us in this regard—neither the gospel of John nor the character John—because all these would have us know, this morning at least, is what we are not. We are none of us the Christ. Like John, I am not.

So how about this? How about we go with Isaiah?

The prophet was speaking of himself, speaking as to the understanding of what he himself had been given to do. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me." Christian tradition, though, ascribed this call to Jesus, who, as the Christ, the Messiah, is the anointed one—sent to bring good news to the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. But Jesus isn't the only anointed one. Anointing: this wasn't, and isn't, an exclusive ritual. Lots of people have been anointed. With oil, with water, with the word, with the Holy Spirit: really, it's likely that *you've* been anointed, perhaps even this morning.

Go, then. Bind up the broken hearted and bring liberty to the captives. Release prisoners—those literally locked up or those locked in cells of ideology or proscriptive, punitive teaching. Comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who've been deprived or are of a faint spirit. Live in love with the Lord who loves justice, and rejoice in this Lord who longs for your whole being, and all that has being, to exult in joy.

This Lord is coming to us, a promise so trustworthy and true we should rejoice in anticipation.

This Lord has come to us, that our joy may be complete.

So, if ever you've thought to do what I say, now's the time. The world awaits. It groans in pain, though in labor pains, birthing something new and good but also as old as life itself. Participate, then, in the birth. Help bring it forth. Prepare the way of the Lord, and then follow in it wherever the Lord leads. If you're ever inclined to follow me, trust that I'm aiming to follow Christ. And if you seem to following well in that way, take glance a behind you because you might spot me.

Thanks be to God.