

12.20.2020 Fourth Sunday in Advent (John 1:19-28)

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy street, when suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing and stopped, even though he could've beaten the light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed what she thought was her chance to get through the intersection. Then, just a few seconds later, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer, who ordered her to exit the car with her hands up. The officer took her in handcuffs to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

Several hours later, an officer approached the cell, opened the door, and the woman was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting. He said to her, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, yelling, and gesturing at the guy in front of you. I noticed the 'Choose Life' license plate frame, the bumper stickers that said 'What Would Jesus Do?' and 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you'd stolen the car."

Have you ever been involved in a case of mistaken identity? In these cases it's often true that who we are not, is even more important than who we are. The woman in this story is many things, but the most important fact she wants investigators to know about her is who she is not, she is not a car thief.

In our Gospel reading this morning we meet John the Baptist, a man who wants investigators to know who he is not. Our reading is set in a time of great expectation, a time when everyone was looking for signs that would point to the promised Messiah, and when they see this truly one-of-a-kind desert preacher dressed in rough camel's hair and a leather belt, living on a diet of locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4), many begin to wonder if he just may be the Messiah. At this point in his ministry, John was drawing such large crowds that he'd attracted the attention of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and when the Jews sent the priests and the Levites to ask John, "*Who are you?*" (John 1:19), John's answer may leave them wondering who

he is, but leaves no doubt about who he is not. The Scripture tells us that John “*confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ*” (John 1:20). John is many things, but the most important fact he wants these investigators to know about him is who he is not, he is not the Christ.

So they question him further, asking, “*Are you Elijah?*” (John 1:21). These investigators are learned men who know that the Book of Malachi ends with this prophecy, “*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers...*” (Malachi 4:5-6). If John is not the Messiah, perhaps he’s Elijah. His appearance and his message lead them to believe this could be true, but John answers the question of “*Are you Elijah?*” by saying, “*I am not.*” Now, it’s important to point out that while John is not Elijah, he was indeed the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy. He was the spiritual successor to Elijah. This fact is revealed in the Gospel according to St. Luke, when the angel Gabriel appears to John’s father, Zechariah, and tells him that John “*will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God,*” and that he will go forth “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*” (Luke 1:16–17).

Now, the investigators question him further, asking, “*Are you that prophet?*” (John 1:21). The prophet they are referring to is found to in the book Deuteronomy (18:15-19). There’s a passage in that book that speaks of a great prophet like Moses who will come and restore Israel. So, if John isn’t the Messiah or Elijah, perhaps he’s that prophet, but this time John is even more emphatic and simply answers their question by saying, “*No.*”

As you read this Gospel passage, it’s easy to see this desert preacher, who’s drawing large crowds, knows the truth that this is not about him. He doesn’t like all this attention. He doesn’t like answering questions about himself. His answers move from, “*I am not the Christ*” to “*I am not*” and then finally end with an emphatic “*No.*” John the Baptist had come to bear witness about another. He recognized who he was not, and if we are going to be proper witnesses, if we (like John) are going to bear witness for Another, we must also recognize who we are not. We can’t think of ourselves as more than what we are, because it is not our glory we seek, but His. We are only witnesses. John knew who he was not, we must know who we are not, and

that truth leads us into our second point.

To be a proper witness, we must also know who we are. The investigators were not content with John's denials. They needed to have an answer to take back to their leaders, so they asked him, "*What sayest thou of thyself?*" (John 1:22). At this point in his ministry, with such a great following, John really could've said anything. He could've talked about how big the crowds are getting, what a great preacher he was, or how many baptisms he'd performed, but John knew who he was. Instead of drawing attention to himself, he quotes the prophet Isaiah and says, "*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord*" (Isaiah 40:3). In other words, John is saying, "You're focusing on the wrong person. I'm only a voice!"

No doubt we've all seen those old movies where the king's servant would ride out of the castle gates, down into the center of town, unroll a scroll and read the king's official announcement. Well, these investigators are making the mistake of focusing on the King's loyal servant, John the Baptist, instead of turning their attention to the King of Kings, our Lord and Savior, and making every effort to be ready for Him.

John said, "I am a voice," and like John, we're also called to be voices. We are the voices chosen to prepare the way, to make the path straight for our Lord, in this generation. Every generation has a voice, and we are the voice for this time and this place. We have been called for such a time as this. The question is: How will we choose to use our voice? How will we answer when the world asks us, "Who are you? What do you say about yourself?"

As Christians what do we say about ourselves? If we follow the example of John the Baptist, we say nothing, because we don't glory in our selves. We, like John, are a voice, a voice that speaks of Jesus. St. Paul followed that example as well. Listen to what he wrote to the Corinthians, "*And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*" (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). Our calling is not to let people know how great we are *with lofty speech or wisdom*, but to let people know, in all humility, how great God is.

There's a story about a father and his young son who were walking down a street in Chicago past a place where a skyscraper was being built. Looking up, they saw men working on the highest floors of this incredibly tall building. The son asked the dad, "What are those little boys doing up there?" "Those aren't boys, they're grown men," replied the father. After thinking about that, the little boy said, "I guess when they reach heaven there won't be anything left of them."

As we draw closer to Christ, the world will see less of us and more of Him. John said, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30). John's words should be our words also. His words should be our constant prayer. "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*" Decrease to the point that when the day comes in which we reach the gates of heaven, there won't be anything left to see but the image of Christ (Colossians 3:10). As we stand before God Almighty, He will see the image of His Son, and a life lived by faith in our Lord and God, who loves us, and gave His life for us. (Galatians 2:20).