

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016
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Who Are You?

In our gospel today Matthew describes two men, defines their roles and tells us who they are. The gospel answers two main questions: Who is Jesus? Who is John?

The first part of the gospel is set with John in prison. Unlike today, in Jesus' time prisoners were not cared for by prison staff. Friends, family members and in this case disciples, brought meals and water to prisoner. And that's why John's disciples are with him in prison. They were free to come and go, but John was not. With the traffic of people coming and going John hears about things that are happening outside, through his disciples, and perhaps the caretakers of other prisoners. There was a buzz about what Jesus was doing outside the walls of the prison. John, prophet that he was, wanted to know if his prophetic voice was becoming reality. Was Jesus the Messiah?

So he sends his caretakers and disciples to ask Jesus directly: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Who are you?

Jesus answered by telling John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." And what they had seen was astonishing. Blind people gained sight, the lame became agile, diseases were cleansed, the deaf could hear, those without life gained it, and the poor regained hope. So to paraphrase, Jesus says to John's folks, "So that's who I am, John. The evidence is clear. It has been seen and heard. Go tell John about that!"

And then Jesus turns to his own disciples and proceeds to clarify who John is: someone unshaken by strong winds, someone able to bear the hardships of the wilderness, and someone unafraid to speak the truth as a prophet, as God's messenger. He says that John has prepared the way for him, that John is great among those born of women. The way has been prepared for the Messiah.

So Jesus is the one, though he doesn't specify this. He never says he's the messiah. The proof is in the actions, the outcomes of the actions, the manner in which his life is conducted, in the way his life is seen and heard. And that distinction - of the divine and compassionate life of Jesus - continues with us today.

We live in an area where credentials have been a pretty big deal. Where are you from? Where did you go to school? Where do you work? Who's your family? If we can't find answers to those questions, we all seek to understand who someone is by their actions. The underlying question when we ask "Who are you?" is "Can I trust you?"

So, if we are followers of Jesus how do people know us? How are we identified as part of Jesus' community? Who are we? Can people around us - family, co-workers, strangers - determine who we are by our actions and our voice? I think this has been difficult of late - murky. We've all been off our game a bit. Where can we go to reset our bearings on how we are to live?

Our baptismal vows are a template for who we are to be. We can refresh ourselves on what we've promised as individuals and as a community as we were baptized into the church.

As individuals we are asked eleven questions when we are baptized into the Episcopal Church. If we were baptized as infants, someone answers on our behalf. Three promises are renunciations, eight are promises to action: In the renunciations We "renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" We "renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" We "renounce all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God." Then, we turn to what we promise: we turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior. We "put our whole trust in his grace and love." We promise "to follow and obey him as Lord."

We promise, with God's help "to continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship." (Isn't that wonderful - we promise to spend time together!!!) and to continue "in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers?" (And we'll do that together in just a little while.) We promise to "persevere in resisting evil" and whenever we fail in this, "to repent and turn to the Lord." Now here's where some of the promises get even more interesting: we promise "to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself" and finally we promise "to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." All of these promises are made by us or on our behalf with the acknowledgement "I will with God's help."

There's the template of how we are to be known as followers of Jesus. But we need God's help and we need each other.

The vows continue. The community, the body of the assembled church on that day, prays for us. The congregation prays for us to be delivered from the way of sin and death, for our hearts to be open to God's grace and truth, that we are filled with God's holy and life-giving Spirit, that we are kept in the faith and communion of the Church. All the people present pray that we are taught by the power of the Holy Spirit to love others. They pray that we are sent out to the world in witness to God's love. And finally the congregation prays that we are brought to the fullness of God's peace and glory. Six prayers which define our path. The way has been set prepared for us.

John is in prison. John wants to know what Jesus is doing and if he's the Messiah. Jesus is in the streets curing people who are sick and giving everyone hope. Jesus, says, let my actions be the evidence of my role. John's disciples reported what they saw and heard that Jesus was doing. By interpretation of these actions and words, John made a decision about Jesus - that in fact, Jesus, the Messiah, had come. Can a stranger make a decision about our faith by what they see us do and what they hear us say? Can our society look at our church and know by our activity that we are followers of Jesus? Our actions are the evidence of who we are.