

Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020

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

The great philosopher Dirty Harry once said, "A man's got to know his limitations."

John, as shown in our text today, is one of those men. The author of the gospel goes to great lengths to make clear John was a human being who came to witness to the light. He himself was NOT the light. Then, under interrogation from the Temple authorities, John confesses, does not deny but confesses, I am NOT the Messiah.

Then there follows a string of confessions on John's part about what he is not. Not Elijah come again, not the prophet.

How refreshing! Someone who actually says up front, I'm not the Messiah. I'm not the savior. I'm not your only hope. I'm not the only one who can save you.

How tempting it would have been for John to accept that mantle. He was drawing huge crowds of people from all over Judea. They came to wherever he was, hanging on his every word. All of them looked to him and wondered, hoped, wished that he WAS the Messiah. That he was the one coming to change their lives. That he would save them. Restore things to the way they should be.

How intoxicating that would be, to be the focus of that adoration and hope. I had a taste of that once. When I was serving at First Lutheran in Cedar Rapids. We were hosting an ecumenical service and I happened to be the

staff person on site when someone from the community came in looking for assistance. It was late and many of the places I could have directed him for resources were closed.

So, I did something I normally wouldn't do, I gave him cash. As he received it, he fell to his knees at my feet, grabbed my hand and began thanking me profusely. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. In those brief moments my brain registered several things. First was what this must look like- an older black man kneeling at the feet of a young white man, clutching his hand- as a child of the South that held uncomfortable undertones. Second was just the shock of the act- you don't see it often in society and to have someone do that to you is startling. Third was a brief moment of, "Wow, this feels good!" To be on the receiving end of that kind of effusive thanks because of what you have done. This was followed very quickly by warning lights and sirens going off in my head, "Danger, Will Robinson, Danger!"

A bit disoriented, I fell back on the example of John and I confessed and did not deny it but confessed to this man at my knees, "The thanks is not to me but to the one who provides for all of us, God. I'm merely the means by which God has given you what you need for today." This saved both me and the man at my feet. It saved me from thinking that "I am God". That I actually provided for this man. It saved him because he could easily have believed that I was the one who had fed him that night. And come to worship me, not the Creator of all that is.

John could easily have stepped into that adoration and adulation and proclaimed himself the Messiah. Accepted the mantle they wished upon him and basked in that power and glory and control.

But he didn't. He knew his limitations. Was very clear about what he was not. Not Messiah. Not Elijah. Not the prophet.

He also knew who he was. "I am the voice of one crying out."

That's his whole purpose. To cry out, "Make straight the way of the Lord." To point always to Jesus, the one who is to come. That and throw some water on people.

And John is okay with that. He is clear about the bounds of both his power and his calling. And being the voice crying out is enough. Because that is what God has called and equipped him to be.

Do you believe that? That who you are and what you do is enough for God?

Look at our text from Isaiah, the prophet acknowledges, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to..." To what? Overthrow governments? Take down the bad guys? Change the hearts and minds of thousands of people? Nope.

"to bring 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;"

Note that Isaiah's call is not to free the oppressed, heal the broken hearted, give liberty to captives.

Nope, his call is to bring good news, to bind up, to proclaim, to comfort. His is a voice calling out, "This is not as it should be" and to offer to those oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, prisoner, mourning what any other human being can- good news, bandages to pull yourself back together, hope, comfort, presence. This is our limitation.

God alone heals, God alone frees, God alone knits the broken-hearted back into a whole being.

Here is the secret that John and Isaiah know, God has good work for you to do that doesn't require you to be anything other than who God created and equipped you to be!

Our call is to proclaim, to bind up, to comfort, to point always to the one who is the Light of the world. The one who is, Emmanuel, God with us. Our call is not to make whole, to heal, to change- that work belongs to God.

This is why I hang with the Christians who happen to be Lutheran because we're really clear on this. Just look at Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy

Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with her gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as she has called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified the whole Christian church on earth.

“I cannot by my own understanding or strength...” This is the only way I can stand here before you after 9 months of this pandemic and even begin to think to do my call. Because it is not my work but the work of the Holy Spirit within me. Because as much as I or you might want to put the burden on me- my calling is not to be the Light but to point to the Light.

To point always beyond myself to the God who loves this screwed up world enough to send God’s only Son down into the mess and love it back to wholeness. To come not in power, might, and glory but as a child- mewling, puking, crying, pooping, helpless.

This is the one we are called to proclaim, point to as our only hope. Our Messiah.

And that is all we are called and equipped by the Holy Spirit to do. Proclaim the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit will do her own work to call, gather, enlighten and make holy. We are not God at work but the means through which God works.

I can handle that, and I know you can, too.

I know most of you, and you can talk pretty good. You can share your own story of faith- your beliefs, doubts, fears, your experiences of God come close to you. You can point to the hope that is in you because of Jesus Christ.

You can do all of this in and through the life you live now. As you speak good news of the never-ending love of God for those who are oppressed by life- bills, mental illness, disease, death- the good news that God in Christ is with them... in you, right by their side. You can do this as you help your broken-hearted friends pull together the pieces of their life. As you cry together, shout your anger and anguish to the stars together, as you wonder together how life will go on- even as it does.

You can do this... because who you are and what you do is enough. Because God's Holy Spirit works in and through you as you proclaim the good news of God's love come down to all of us. As you sit with friends on the ash heap of their life. As you get groceries for your neighbor, provide Christmas presents for those who need some help, put a smile on someone's face.

You can do this, you are enough, because it is God who works in and through you. We just point in what we say and do... God does the work.

You can do this... point like John to Jesus. The one in whom lies all our hopes. In whom lies our salvation.

Jesus, God with us. The one who is coming. Soon and very soon.

Thanks be to God.