

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 3rd Sunday Advent Year B2

Talk about an interrogation! One question after another. They don't let up. If I'm John, I may feel like saying, "Guys, guys what? Are you writing a book?" Well, someone is listening and taking note which is seen by the very fact that we even hear of this encounter (*we call them gospel writers-maybe it's the evangelist John whose gospel we are reading*) But the Baptist is asked, "Are you messiah, are you Elijah, are you...., are you.....?" John may think he is at a press conference (*is that why they call it press---they're pressing, pressuring?*) All of this sudden attention could go to one's head (but not with John, & I'll say more about that in a moment). Please note that these just aren't any guys, coming to check out John Baptist. No, the gospel tells us they are "Priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem" (*John has caught the attention of someone powerful at headquarters-Recalling that Zechariah served as priest in the Temple, maybe gossip had spread in the hallways about his son*) and we heard that there will be a second wave of questioners, the Pharisees, also showing up to question John. This could be big! I think of this sudden attention something like the stir that is created like when we hear of several UK Wildcat recruiters showing up at a Marshall County High School basketball game and taking notes, asking about players. Such attention can mess with a person's ego. But this popularity makes John Baptist's humility stand out even more. John knows who he is, and who he isn't. He is a wonderful Advent figure of simple humble service of God (always saying, "Not me, but to God, all the glory"). Much like all the people we hear about leading up to Christmas (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph and here John). They all simply do, what they are called to, keeping focus always on Christ.

It might trouble us that we hear John say *he is **not Elijah***, because when Zechariah received his angelic visit, he was told, "this child will go before Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah..... to turn hearts to God....."(Luke 1:17). And Jesus Himself will testify that John stands in & functions for Elijah in Matthew 11:14 & Matt 17:13. What do we make of this? Is he or is he not like Elijah? Well, for sure, John is John, and Elijah is Elijah because each child of God is unrepeatable and unique - we don't believe in reincarnation. But more to the point, John denies any identification with the great and holy Elijah, because John always shuns prestige and popularity-"that's not me" says John. John pushes away the title 'Elijah' similar to how he will protest against even Jesus later when Jesus shows up to be baptized by him, "No, No, No -- whoa- me baptize you, no it

should be the other way around Jesus.” But there, Jesus will give the same reason, “We do this to fulfill (Matt 13:15) prophecy. Let it be.....” (Matt 3:13-17)!

So, John’s protestations about not being Elijah are simply his humility shining through. He is a simple, humble servant of God. John knows that he is only a messenger. He’s saying, “Forget about me as soon as you receive the message.”

So, that is why John (3x) denies, denies, denies. Three times he does this. He answers, “I am not the Christ”, “I am not”, and then simply “No” to the Priest and Levites’ flattering questions. (It is so interesting how John’s answers get successively shorter each time, from four words, down to three words and finally simply one word– which embodies exactly what he said he’d do (John 3:3), “I must decrease, and He (Jesus) increase!” Isn’t that neat? John is saying, “Let me slip away, from the sunlight of this Light of the World now revealed that is Jesus.”)

But again, that is what John teaches, humility (honest self-appraisal). Who are we? Do we know our true selves? Our weaknesses especially. John knows he is nothing alongside God. He knows he needs God – so he waits on God and prepares for his coming. That is our first step in preparing for God to come is to know we need God, that we need help - a Savior. “God come to my assistance!” This what we are supposed to be doing in Advent – getting ready for the Savior!

I love here how John makes three denials. (Now these are good denials-unlike Peter’s later three denials-bad). John’s are good because he is denying himself, instead of denying someone else (as Peter does). To deny oneself something as in saying, “I will sacrifice, not make you sacrifice.” Doesn’t sound so Christian? Later on Jesus is going to teach exactly this: Denying oneself is what is required to follow him and to gain eternal life. In Matthew 16:24 (& Lk 14:27) Jesus explicitly teaches us, “Whoever wishes to come after me, must deny self, take up his cross daily and follow me.”

When we deny ourselves, that gives life to others (we don’t deny them – No, we give to them, what we have shorted ourselves.) How do they say it but, “When we give, others live.” Doesn’t that sound so Christmasy, too? How many times do we hear out in public, in elevators, or at store counters, etc “Are you ready for Christmas?” They mean have we secured gifts to offer other people – to give. That could be John’s message, Right? Think of that the next time a clerk asks you, “Are you ready for Christmas?” Say to yourself or them, “Hey, that sounds just like John the Baptist – Am I ready, prepared to meet the Lord?” That may make an impromptu moment to evangelize, share that Christian interpretation.

So, John teaches us humility – He wants no attention. Even when John does give an answer as to what he is up to, he just quotes Isaiah-lets Isaiah talk for him-that is humble. I love here how John basically turns the tables of interrogation on his questioners. They went out question him, and he puts a question back on them. “Are you ready to meet the coming Savior?” If pushed how we do that-get ready? John is showing the way – humble oneself. He interrogates us, “Do we deny ourselves to benefit other people”. Are we sacrificing, taking from ourselves and giving it to another? That is getting ready for the Messiah’s coming. Deny ourselves, and give to others. Humility, being a servant of God, means putting others first, giving of ourselves to offer them fuller life. So, John the Baptist asks us, “Are you ready for Christmas?” And he means by this, are we following Christ, by ‘denying ourselves’ giving a little for others, humbly putting them ahead of ourselves – that is the way of readying ourselves for Jesus to come.