

It's the third Sunday of Advent in year B of our lectionary, so we have arrived at the great "I am not." It's not a message we often hear, but a model we ought pay attention to.

Priests and Levites were sent out to meet John in the wilderness by Jews in Jerusalem. Their interrogation might have been loaded, but the question was open-ended, "Who are you?"

"I am not the Messiah," he responded, and "I am not," when asked specifically whether he was Elijah. "No," not the prophet either.

Yet, the Jews were under occupation by the Roman Empire and were anxiously awaiting the Messiah promised in scripture. This one in the wilderness acting out their religious tradition brought great interest and now within this conversation, confusion and frustration. "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

John is sure of his role, and nothing of him matters that does not relate to the one coming after. As he has been depicted in paintings, iconography, and statues throughout the centuries, John is always pointing—pointing to something, someone, else. He reiterates, "I am not," deflecting attention so that his follower would get it all.

John indeed is the "I am not," so that John can faithfully testify to the light that is to come. John is not so that Jesus can be. Jesus confesses his relationship with the Father: "'I am the bread of life.'" "I am the resurrection." "I am the good shepherd." All these things Jesus will be for God's people, but John's job is simply to bear witness to the light." (Third Sunday of Advent, Sunday, December 13, 2020.

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You probably remember a trend from 10 or 20 years ago marked by bracelets inscribed with W.W.J.D.?, standing for, “What Would Jesus Do?” The movement attempted to create faithful reflection by asking each to consider their own behavior in light of what Jesus might have done in such a situation. It had its effect and made an impact. However, there’s a fundamental disconnect: Jesus can perform miracles and I cannot.

It might be more responsible to ask, “What Would John Do?” He’s the one who so faithfully calls others attention to Jesus and likewise doesn’t make things about himself. “From the constant self-expression and self-aggrandizement encouraged, promoted, and even demanded by social media to the posturing of too many political candidates as the only person who can do the job, we are living during a distinctly ego-centric, if not full-on narcissistic, time in our culture. What a refreshing change to see someone say “I’m not the messiah” and then follow up with a series of “no” responses to the other questions about what great figure John might be. Who is John instead? Just exactly what God called him to be: the voice of one crying in the wilderness, someone destined to prepare the way for another, a person called to point others to Jesus.” (David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/12/advent-3-b-joyful-sacrifice/>)

There are lots of churches who think their mission is to get more members and are oblivious that there’s nothing in scripture to suggest this. Instead, our call is closer to John’s, to point to Jesus, to testify to Jesus so that others may see him too— And pave the way for others to be changed by Jesus too.

What might it be like to adopt John’s vocation of testimony, and shape our Christian lives as telling of the one who came—and the one who is coming again? What would we sound like? How would our ministry look?

Maybe I should practice what I preach?

I am not important. I am not the one you need to see or hear, but I know the one who is... He is the one filled with light and hope and love beyond

this world, not from this world. He is the one sent from God to blast away all fear, all judgment, to see you and bring you to a new realm where all the hatred, all the partisanship, all the greed of this world is gone. Instead, love, and truth will reign.

“In Mary Oliver’s poem, “Making the House Ready for the Lord,” she writes of simple preparations that turn to hospitality for the creatures near her house. The whole time she is welcoming others she trusts Christ will know “that really I am speaking to you whenever I say, / as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in” (Third Sunday of Advent, Sunday, December 13, 2020.

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Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but
still nothing is as shining as it should be
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an
uproar of mice it is the season of their
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves
and through the walls the squirrels
have gnawed their ragged entrances but it is the season
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,

the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-geese, know
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

(Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver [Boston: Beacon Press, 2006], p. 13)”

Amen.