



SAINT LUKE'S

"ALL ABOUT GOD"

ADVENT 3
YEAR B

ISAIAH 61:1-4,8-11
PSALM 126
1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24
JOHN 1:6-8,19-28

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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John the Baptist defines himself as much by who he is not as by who he is: I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. We often refer to John the Baptist as a prophet, so when he says he is not the prophet, clarification is helpful. In some 1st century circles, such as the Mandaeans, the Messiah was expected to be a “prophet like Moses”. A few Mandaeans still exist - mostly in Iraq but also in Iran – and they continue to believe that John the Baptist was the Messiah. Mandaeanism arose in the 2nd and 3rd centuries – the same time as the early church was finding its way and defining its own beliefs. In his day, John was a Billy Graham-like celebrity and Jesus’ followers have to reckon with John’s influence. This interrogation of John the Baptist is included in part to place John as Jesus’ forerunner, not himself the Messiah, but the last of the prophets pointing the way. So lots of “I am nots” from John.

Then John says who he is: *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “make straight the way of the Lord”*. John does not start by identifying himself as the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Instead, John defines himself by his role in God’s purposes. We might say John consistently surrenders his own ego. Despite John’s powerful witness in the desert and his fame, John is very clear that none of his work is about him. As we look at John’s humility, it seems to me that we sorely need a little more of that kind of integrity and maturity in public life today. We need leaders who look forward and plan for a better tomorrow, who put the common good and the future ahead of short term gain or popularity or their own ego. John always looks to the One coming after him. In medieval art, John is often literally pointing to Jesus. As Jesus

begins his own ministry, John will say: *He [Jesus] must increase and I must decrease.*¹ John is an example to all of us in pointing to Jesus in our lives. There is something else John embodies – clarity of identity. Some aspects of our identity are handed to us at birth. I cannot choose NOT to be Caucasian. Other choices are our own. We can choose additional identities – perhaps of citizenship, or marriage, or life profession. We can choose to follow Jesus.

However, saying Yes to one thing often involves saying No to something else. We cannot be monks or nuns and be married at the same time. As Christians, we cannot have two spouses at the same time. To follow Jesus as he asks, we cannot have equal loyalty to lesser gods: money, fame, popularity, security, other philosophies of being.

This is worth deep reflection today because we live in an age where identities, commitments and truths seem to be malleable and interchangeable. Truth is whatever we say it is. The very concept of objective facts is under siege. Everything is one alternative or another. We are planning our next “Conversations That Matter” event for March 11 and the title will be “What is Truth?”. This is Pilate’s question to Jesus as Jesus is on trial.² *What is truth?* is Pilate’s closing argument, and marks the end of the trial. Jesus says he speaks truth and Pilate shrugs: *What is truth?* So you say... “Fake” is the new catchword to refute anything I don’t agree with or don’t like. Where does that leave us, if truth and verifiable facts are all relative and there are always equally valid “alternative facts”?

¹ John 3:30

² John 18:38

It is not only objective facts that are under siege. Today we are encouraged to select from a marketplace of carefully curated social media identities and self-promotion. We manicure, select, present or conceal aspects of our identities as seems good to us. This can be harmless as long as we are clear that all truths are not equal. Some truths are so partial as to be a lie by omission or outright falsehood. Constantly reinventing ourselves is not a mature life philosophy. We cannot be all things to all people. A little bit more John the Baptist clarity about who we are not and who we are would be healthy. We need a stable foundation and primary identity from which to make secondary choices. For us, that is Christ is our primary identity and reference point in making choices.

John the Baptist's courage and faithfulness lands him in prison and costs him his life on the whim of Herod's niece.³ He is a firebrand, a reformer seeking revival within the heart of the Hebrew tradition. John the Baptist calls the religious leaders a brood of vipers⁴ but he is about more than pointing fingers. He is baptizing, renewing the faith of ordinary people, getting to the heart of what matters. Reform isn't only about throwing out and cutting down. God's reforms are always about renewal.

The tipping point for change can be one brave John the Baptist-like person who speaks up for reform. Sometimes it's not so much the words but the courage that inspires others to say Me Too and join in a

³ Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12

⁴ Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9

reform movement. For example, I suspect that most women have had some “Me Too” experiences - and many men also -in work places and elsewhere. The advice women used to get was: just be careful. Avoid vulnerable situations as much as possible. You certainly wouldn’t speak up. Today we can say: this is not acceptable; you will be fired. That is reform - new norms and expectations of respect for the dignity of every human being - and ultimately a renewal of society.

There are many shadowy corners in today’s world where the light and the courage of John are needed. Sometimes we know where those corners are chiefly by our reluctance to “go there”, our fear in confronting them. What are those corners where we live and work? Where are those shadowy places where we are called to stand up and step forward? John the Baptist is unique - a one-off. But John’s refusal to be complicit in the religious and socially exploitative systems of his day - John’s courage in stepping up - can inspire all of us in every age.

AMEN

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