

Advent 4 (2023)

The story is told of a man in a distant land coming to a meeting where a missionary was telling the story of Jesus.

This messenger made Jesus real. He told of the Saviour's divine origin . . . of His love . . . of His heaven-sent rescue mission.

He told about His birth in Bethlehem and His death on Calvary.

He told about His resurrection, ascension and promise to come again.

The native man was captivated by Jesus and came to Christian faith. He went back to his home village with a new freedom and joyfulness of heart.

His enthusiasm and joy spilled over to his neighbors. Soon they were clamoring to know about Jesus.

A week or so later he went back to the place where he had attended the meeting to seek out the missionary-preacher. He wanted to know more and perhaps even to bring the man to his village.

There was just one problem. He couldn't remember his name. All he could say when asked was: **“He showed me Jesus.”**

John the Baptist would not have minded one bit if someone had forgotten his name but had learned from him the name of Jesus.

John's one aim was to point his fellow countrymen to Israel's long-looked-for Messiah . . . to prepare and make them ready for His coming . . . to be a voice, God's voice.

He saw himself as the Messiah's advance man and not the chief star in the show.

“He must increase. I must decrease,” he said.

Surely, there is a lesson here for those who mount the pulpit Sunday by Sunday in Christian churches. John reminds them why they are there and what they should be about.

There is a Lutheran church in Atlanta with a plaque at the entrance of the pulpit. It reads:
“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

These words come from some Greeks who came to Philip, one of the Twelve, seeking an audience with Jesus.

Their words serve as a reminder to the preacher to keep the main thing the main thing.

A preacher does not step into the pulpit to entertain, though one devoutly hopes he or she doesn't put the congregation to sleep!

Sermons should certainly have a story-like quality that commands the attention of those who listen. They should not be boring.

Nor is humor out of place in the pulpit, but it is the primary reason the preacher is there. The preacher is not a comedian. The preacher is there to magnify Jesus.

The preacher's experiences and personality are not set aside. Rather the preacher's presentation the Gospel is filter through these two things. Christ, however, must remain at the center of the proclamation.

But it is not just clergy who need to be remind of this. Every Christian is called to reflect Jesus. 'Jesus reveled in me' is part of our common calling.

B.B. McKinney was a well-known song writer and music editor in the 20th Century, especially in the American South.

A native of Louisiana and a devout Baptist, he wrote the words and music to 149 hymns and Gospel songs.

In the chapel of the mental hospital where I did clinical pastoral training, we used the hymnal he edited . . . *The Broadman*. First published in 1940, it remains in print today.

One of B.B. McKinney's gospel songs found in this hymnal is entitled: "Let other's see Jesus in you."

The second stanza goes to the heart of the matter. It ends with a question every Christian should consider. It says:

**Your life's a book before their eyes,
They're reading it through and through;**

**Say, does it point them to the skies,
Do others see Jesus in you?**

That was John's aim. He wanted men and women to see Jesus. He wanted to be invisible.

Can people see Jesus in you and me? Are we a voice . . . calling those around us to look beyond the tinsel things of time to the eternal . . . to that which really satisfies?

But there is another thing we can learn from John the Baptist, and that is appropriate humility.

To some, 'humility,' has decidedly negative connotation.

It suggests put-ons, people who are outwardly pious and self-effacing, but it is a charade. This was not so with John the Baptist. He was the real deal.

When the religious leaders came down from Jerusalem and asked him who he was, He denied vehemently that he was the Messiah, which would be expected, but he also denied being Elijah?

Now on the surface this second question – “Are you Elijah” -- seems a silly one. It would be like asking President Biden if he was Abraham Lincoln. But, in fact, in the context of Scripture it is a reasonable one.

Let me explain. Malachi, in the last book of the Old Testament, says that an Elijah figure would show up prior to the coming of the Messiah. Speaking in God’s name, he writes:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers . . .”

But who was Elijah, the historical figure? ///

Elijah was the 9th-century BC prophet who was taken up into heaven in a chariot in a whirlwind.

He was known for his plain speaking and denouncements of the prophets of Baal. He called people to back to the worship of Yahweh.

But here is the rub. John denied he was this figure, BUT Jesus in last Sunday's Gospel affirms that he was.

What are we to make this seeming discrepancy?

I think John's denial goes back to his humility. His goal was to be a faithful voice.

If advancements and titles came, they must come from someone else. **“Let another man**

praise thee, and not thine own mouth,” says Proverbs 27:2.

What is certain is that Jesus saw in John more than he saw in himself. He saw in him a prophet and more than a prophet.

I want to suggest that is often the case. No doubt it is true with you and me.

We may feel that we make little difference in the world. Yet, at the judgment of the last day, if we have been faithful and have done the many small tasks God has given us, we will be surprised.

We shall find we touched the lives of many we didn't even know about.

People are in the Kingdom because of us and our witness.

The key is: Staying close to Christ. Being faithful. Perseverating.

John reminds to leave accolades and titles to God. Words of 1 Peter 5:6 come to mind:

“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.”

John saw himself as only a voice. Jesus saw him as that last great prophet of the old dispensation, the Elijah of prophecy.

No doubt there are many lessons we can learn from John the Baptist, but I think the two we have identified this morning are especially timely:

- “Jesus revealed in me.” May that be our aim. If they forget our name, so be it.

- Secondly, let us leave the assessment of our life and work to God. In all probability we shall be surprised.

On the Fourth Sunday in Advent, our readings remind us of the nearness of our Lord's coming. If you think about it, He comes in at least three ways.

In a very few hours, He comes liturgically as we celebrate His birth 2000 years ago.

He comes at His Second Advent, as well as in the hour of the believer's death.

And thirdly and finally, He comes in the many small things of life. He shows up to guide, encourage, heal and help.

When you find yourself at a crossroad and don't know which way to turn, when you face conflict and discouragement, as well as when life is going well, say:

“Lord Jesus, I know you are nearer than my breath. Come. Be present. Your people wait. I wait.”

May this be our prayer as Advent draws to a close and we enter the second great season of the Church Year: the celebration of the nativity of our Lord.