

“I am not the Messiah!”

December 11, 2011

Text: Psalm 126, John 1:6-8, 19-28

I.

When John the Baptist appears in the wilderness during Advent, right away he becomes all the rage. Garbed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waste, he must have been something to behold. According to the gospel stories, people flocked to him in droves.

Even with all the glitter and appeal, however, people weren’t sure who he was. Certainly, the religious establishment didn’t know. They were probably knocked off their game a bit by all the clamor he aroused. Wanting to know more, the Jewish leaders sent some priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ***Who are you?***

In our own day, it’s like when the popularity of a presidential candidate begins to achieve a sustained rise in the polls, the national media starts what could only be called *a brutal vetting process*. ***Who are you?*** *Are you worthy of your sudden popularity?*

Who is this John person, exhorting people to turn from their sins and to be blessed with a Baptism of forgiveness? ***Who are you,*** they wanted to know?

Right away, he assured them, ***I am NOT the Messiah!***

Well, who are you then, they wanted to know? *You’re not Elijah, are you? Or some other prophet? Are you Moses? Who are you?*

No doubt they wondered where he got all his power and energy ... and what made him so compelling and so passionate for his cause.

For many of us Christians, there is always a lingering curiosity about John ... John the Baptist ... the forerunner of Jesus. Who was this guy? ***I am NOT the Messiah!***

II.

For any of us in life—as we transition from young adulthood into adulthood, and then on to mature adulthood—it’s important to know *who we are*.

In part, that’s why we pursue a college education and beyond, or go into the military at a young age—to discover who we are. It’s one of the benefits of traveling ... and learning new languages—again, to enlarge our horizons. It’s part of a process of discovering who we are.

This process of self-discovery is one of the reasons we try to develop new relationships—in other words: to get to know people who are different from us ... or who can challenge us in creative ways.

Sometimes, it's an important reason why we risk a change in our career or try some new approach in the career that we are in.

Who are you, they wanted to know?

If we think about it, it's also important in life to know *who we are not*. ***I am NOT the Messiah!***

If we reflect on this, this is an important confession. It's important that John NOT confuse his role with the role of Jesus, the one who is to come. As it turns out, there's a respected tradition of reserve and hesitation with the biblical prophets. When they are being *called by God*, it's an awesome prospect. It's understandable, therefore, that they would have some hesitation. CHECK IT OUT:

1. With the prophet **Amos**: *I am not a prophet or a prophet's son ... I am only a herdsman from Tekoa.*
2. With Isaiah: *Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips ... I'm not worthy to do this ...*
3. And with Jeremiah: *Oh, Lord God ... I am only a boy; I can't do this ...*

III.

Again, in knowing who we are, it's important to know who we are not. It's important to have an honest sense of our personal limitations. Sometimes our inherent gifts simply aren't in line with external expectations from family or friends.

Often times, we devote considerable energy in our lives in trying to sort out who we *are not*. Early on in, for example, we might think we're going to be a doctor or a lawyer ... but then we discover in high school or in our first years in college that *organic chemistry* or *political science* is NOT our strength.

We might think we're going to be a nurse but then we learn that the sight of blood bothers us ... or that the idea of sticking needles in people doesn't wear well with us.

We might have grown up thinking we were going to be a business person but then, later, we learn that what we really want to do is teach. Our lives are like this: sorting ourselves out ... trying to find out who we are.

It's important to know *who we are NOT*. ***I am NOT the Messiah!***

IV.

Part of what this is about is authenticity. We want to be genuine—faithful to our sense of who we are in the depths of our being. As Steve Jobs admonished us, some years back, in a Commencement Address at Stanford University,

Don't live somebody else's life. Hard to argue with that!

When we can openly admit *who we are not*, we move beyond pretense. We are more free to be and become whom God calls us to be. Being authentic to ourselves and to our sense of *God moving in our lives* helps us to be a more healthy, more whole person.

Chaim Potok was an intensely religious man, a Jew who had spent considerable time reflecting on his faith journey. You may remember: he was the author of the novel, *The Chosen*, and then, later, its sequel, *The Promise*. From early on, he knew he wanted to be a writer. However, his mother had ideas. When he went off to college, she said to him:

Son, now I know you want to be a writer. But I want you to think about being a brain surgeon. You'll keep a lot of people from dying and you'll make a lot of money.

Taking all of this in, Potok answered her, *No, mama, I want to be a writer.*

However, NO is not what mama wanted to hear. Every vacation break for four years she would repeat her comments about him becoming a brain surgeon and keeping people from dying and making a lot of money. His response to her was always the same: *Mama, I want to be a writer.*

Finally, the son had enough and when the same mantra started the next time, with exasperation, he cut his mother off and, with great passion, told her:

Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying, I want to show them how to live.

V.

One of the messages of Advent, as we move towards the *birth at Bethlehem*, is that, as Christians, we are *witnesses to the light*. And when we are *witnesses to the light*, we show people *how to live*.

It's a process, a process of warming from within—a *warming of the human heart*. If we're awake ... and if we open ourselves to the beauty and wonder of the Christmas story, it will draw us in and we will discover ourselves being *witnesses to the light*. We'll find ourselves reaching out to the needy with caring and compassion, wanting to help *pick people up*.

Hey, we never know when any of us might be down. All the time in our lives, stuff happens. Stuff we can't necessarily control and anticipate. Reaching out to those in need is what *witnessing to the light* calls out of us. It's what Christmas makes us feel like doing.

It's like we can't help ourselves because the light of Christ and the person of Jesus shine so brightly in our heart and spirit.

The light of Christ is a light that invites us to *risk* love. *Just do it! Do the loving thing!* It invites us to *risk* forgiveness, and to *risk* kindness, compassion and generosity.

These Christian virtues are reflections of the light. They reflect the truth, the power and the love of Christ in the world. You see, friends, every time we reflect these virtues ... every time we reach out and touch somebody with compassion and kindness, with caring and generosity, the light of Christ shines more brightly in the world.

Never think, therefore, that your *witness* does not make a difference.

VI.

What's most interesting and compelling in all of this is the realization that this light of Christ shines through all of us who open ourselves to it in the richness of our diversity.

Sometimes, the way we embrace life is diametrically opposed. Hey, we're different. But, still, the light comes if we seek it out. We may have serious disagreements about many things—from the way we read the Bible and think about God, to our understanding of freedom and responsibility, to the way we think on a whole range of issues.

Still, if we open ourselves to it, the light comes and it abides in us; it works *in* us and *through* us and does what it can to bend us towards Christ's ways.

The light shines through our differences. It shines through our imperfections and shortcomings. It shines through our stubbornness and our old, worn-out ways of doing things. It shines through the many things we may not like about ourselves but simply don't know how to change.

At the end of the day, what's so unique about Jesus is the glimpse he gives us of God. The light that Jesus became in the world paints a picture of God and God's purposes that can save the world; because God's purposes are about LIFE.

And when we are alive to God's purposes, the angels sing ... the shepherds rejoice ... the wise men share their abundance ... and the Christ child is born.

And once again, people from every corner of the earth feel the HOPE. The word of Christmas, friends, is that LOVE makes everything new.

In closing, I leave you with this:

This LOVE—the love of Christmas—is the face of God.

It is the person of Jesus.

Indeed, it shows us how to live.

Come O Holy One, come!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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