

# Sermon: Advent 6

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December 17, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8,19-28

Thirty or so years ago... I had some trouble finding work... and I came to realize... that it was less about what I knew... and more about who knew me... my education... and work experience... and qualifications mattered... but what seemed to matter more... were the relationships I might make within that field... the connections I might make... so if there could be two or three degrees of separation... instead of six... between who I talked to... and who might hire me... then even better... I mean... there was no LinkedIn...

In fact... I paid for some career counseling... and the preferred technique... the primary method to advance my career... was writing a letter... typing a personalized letter... not to Human Resources... but to a named manager in the department in which I was interested... and legitimately... honestly... be able to write... that Mr. Bob Smith... or Mrs. Mary Jones... whom they knew... had personally suggested I meet with them... NOT because they thought he would have a job for me... I didn't write that I hoped he had a job for me... but I was writing... because maybe he knew... someone who might... maybe he could suggest how I could improve my resumé to highlight what I could do... and how I could serve...

My career counselor knew that it was critical to get me in front of these decision makers... and this approach... was about creating an opportunity for them to know me more than they knew my resumé... to get to know me... because when it comes down to it... maybe not every time... but most of the time... when it comes down to it... managers would prefer someone less qualified who they can get along with and work with... than someone who has two Ph.D.s... but is impossible to be around... so in the end... maybe they would... offer me a position...

And in our lives... we want to know people... we want references for those who come into our homes to provide housecleaning... or pest control... or home improvements... we want to know not only what they can do... but we want to know who knows them... we want to know who the baby sitter is... for who else's children... does she or he care... are there references... we want to know about the parents... when our kids go to someone's sleepover...

In fact... this protective instinct is so powerful... that when my daughter Rachel was only about ten... when my former wife and I had known my priest and his wife for only a few short months... they invited her to drive with them from Ohio to Michigan to visit *their* daughter... and it all seemed so innocent... so reasonable... but after they drove away... in the few hours that followed... but that seemed like an eternity... we questioned the rationale of our decision... we felt irrational concern for her safety... after all... she was going somewhere with people we hardly knew... to a place we'd never been... and she'd be with people we didn't know at all... but the moment she called... our concerns evaporated... and we felt a bit foolish for doubting... but still... we want to know who people are...

Matthew describes him as John the Baptist... Mark describes him as John the Baptizer... Luke describes him only as ben Zechariah... the son of Zechariah... but today... it's just John... so the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem... to ask him... *Who are you?*... and he confessed... he did not deny... he was not the Messiah... but he stopped there... so they fed him possibilities... and he answered in the negative... he was not Elijah... and he was not the unnamed prophet for whom they were waiting... we can only imagine their exasperation... *Let us have an answer for those who sent us... what do you have to say about yourself...*

UCC minister Martha Spong wrote... *How often do we define ourselves in the negative? There's a tendency among moderate-to-progressive Christians... to differentiate themselves from more conservative folk by describing themselves as "not that kind of*

*Christian." I understand and even sympathize... she wrote... but a negative definition cannot describe us in full — and it certainly will not offer an invitation to the person asking the question. Wherever we may find ourselves on the theological spectrum, we need to work out a different kind of answer to the question. Who are we? In this age of easy labeling, we may be reluctant to say... and while we may ask who others are... we may not really want to take the time to learn...*

God knew that it was critical to get John in front of Jerusalem's decision makers... but the priests and Levites didn't want to know that God knew John... they wanted to see John's resumé... they wanted to know who authorized him to baptize... in a way... they wanted to know who was bold enough to suggest he write them a letter of introduction... and although God sent him... he implies that it was Isaiah... by quoting him... *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness... make straight the way of the Lord...* the problem is... those questioning John could only know who he is... by knowing the One he precedes...

And John said... I baptize with water... and if you think that's all there is to it... if you think that cleaning the outside of the body is all that's needed... then think bigger... think deeper... open your eyes a hundred times wider... no... a thousand times wider... you think baptizing with water cleans us fully... just wait... you haven't seen anything yet... because the One who comes after me... is both among you... and beyond you... he shines with the light of Truth... but he's as invisible to you as the poor and marginalized are... as invisible as those who have been cast out by the Empire with which you've aligned yourselves... you see only what you want to see... you see only what fits into... or breaks... your rules... and your laws... I baptize with water... but I'm not even worthy enough to untie his sandal...

What John means... is that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit... to clean us inside... as Jesus said in Matthew 23... *Woe to you... scribes and Pharisees... for you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate... but inside they are full of greed and self-*

*indulgence... first clean the inside of the cup... so that the outside may also become clean...*

You see... now as then... too many like to pray in the synagogues... and at the street corners... and be seen by others... we like to do things that really do help those in need... those oppressed by unjust economic systems... but we don't do enough to change the systems themselves... they say that budgets are moral documents... you know... *for where your treasure is... there will your heart be also...* but so are tax plans... and there's something egregiously immoral... about allowing those who already have more money than they know what to do with... to have more... by taking it away from those who can barely survive... and by increasing the national debt by almost one-and-a-half trillion dollars over ten years... as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians... when referring to those in the wilderness Exile... *the one who had much did not have too much... and the one who had little did not have too little...*

God knew that it was critical to get John and Jesus in front of Jerusalem's decision makers... but we know that priests... Levites... Pharisees... scribes... soldiers... governors... and kings... opposed both John and Jesus... and both were killed... and we know that in our day... those who are elected to power... or who steal it for themselves... continue to oppose them... and their expression of God's will for us...

Sometimes... when Deacon Kim ends the Gospel... she says... *This is God's Story...* and we answer... *This is Our Story...* because it's true... and our story of repentance... of turning back to God... is like Scrooge's story in [A Christmas Carol](#)... which starts out joyless... but ends in a changed heart...

So you see... God incarnated as a little baby... not because we needed another little baby... Jesus became the Christ... not so we could have faith in him... but so that we could have the same faith as him... but here's the joy... here's why John came to testify to the light... here's why we celebrate Gaudete Sunday today... and light a rose-colored

candle... God loves us... and became empty... and rejected the powerful... and lifted up the lowly... God came to save us... because we need saving... and we cannot do it on our own... God came to save us... because we are worth saving... God came to save us... out of love... please consider that... during this final week of waiting...

Mike+