Among You

A Meditation on John 1: 6– 8, 19 – 28 and Isaiah 61: 1 – 4, 8 – 11

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church December 13, 2020

By the middle of May, Lou and I will become first time grandparents, and people are asking us what grandparent names we are planning to choose. Frankly, I have no idea what I hope to be called, and I’m beginning to learn that it may not matter, as often the grandchild makes that choice for you. There are so many options. Nana. Mimi. Gigi. Gammy. Gran. I even found a web site with ideas. I was a little surprised to see a subcategory of “cool names,” which included “Foxy,” and “Sassy.” The thought of a two-year-old waving to me on Zoom while saying, “Hi, Foxy!” is pretty hilarious. But the thought of being known in a new way – that’s intriguing.

I have been known as a mother, sister, daughter, teacher, pastor, friend, but never grandparent.

Sometimes we can anticipate these new ways of being known. Sometimes they surprise us. Finishing college felt a bit like falling off a cliff for me. I had no idea what was next. I had no idea who I was and very little understanding of who I hoped to become. Various opportunities invite us to define ourselves in fresh ways - starting a new career, taking on a new role with an organization, a new relationship. Illness or injury affect the way we see ourselves and how others may know us in positive and negative ways. Retirement is another one of those complex moments – what door to open, what path to take as you experience yourself in a completely, possibly less defined way.

We, like John the baptizer, or John the witness (Caroline Lewis, Working Preacher), may define ourselves by who we are as well as who we are not, as we heard in today’s encounter.

I knew a child in Nashville named Henry, although he wasn’t known as Henry to most people. Henry was called “Hap” by his family and friends. At the pediatrician’s office or school, other places where he wasn’t really known, he was called Henry, at least at the beginning. When he was between the ages of 3 and 4, he was wondering about this…about why people called him by different names. He looked at his mother and said, “Sometimes I’m Henry, and sometimes I’m Hap, and sometimes I’m just Jesus.” This was news to his mother, who had never heard him called Jesus, but who did begin to wonder if maybe she or her spouse had at some point mumbled, “*Jesus,* Henry” in the midst of parenting exhaustion. I guess it’s a good thing they never said “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Henry” as that might have completely bewildered the poor child.

One thing John was clear about: he was NOT Jesus. He was Cousin John, or John the baptizer or John the witness, or Preacher John. (Have you ever noticed that in John’s gospel, John the baptizer does not actual baptize Jesus as in the synoptics? He testifies to who Jesus is and anticipates a baptism of the Holy Spirit through Jesus, giving a distinct emphasis to the River Jordan meeting.)

John is very clear about who he is not. Before the religious leaders can even ask, he says, “I am not the Christ.”

“Are you the prophet Elijah?” “No,” answers John.

“Are you *the* prophet?” They ask. (A possible reference to Moses?) And again, John says “no.”

“Who are you? We must know,” they say. Instead of a replying with his name, which they probably know, or his family of origin, which they probably also know, since his father was a priest, he defines himself through the words of the prophet Isaiah.

“I am a voice,” says John. “I am a voice in the wilderness. I am here to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming.”

A voice. That is all John claims to be. A witness.

A voice, urging people to remove the obstacles in God’s way.

A witness carrying forward the message of the prophets who went before him.

John knew who he was and what he was put on this earth to do. He knew who he was, and he didn’t worry if people thought his clothes were odd or his diet disgusting. He lived in the way in which he needed to live in order to be able to walk with God. He couldn’t pick up a Bible and look up Isaiah chapter 40; those were words he carried in his heart. They were his personal mission statement: I, John, am a voice crying in the wilderness. I come to labor with any who will join me. I come to prepare a way for God.

He said something else that makes me pause, and it is this: *Someone greater stands among you, whom you don’t recognize. (vs. 26).* This isn’t really criticism. It’s more of an alert. A call to watchfulness. If we kept reading, this is what we would hear:

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.’ Even I didn’t recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel. (vs. 29 – 31)*

It isn’t the miracle of a baby in a manger for John; it’s the miracle of Jesus’ appearance at the Jordan. We hear John say, “I didn’t recognize him.” But John witnesses the Spirit coming down upon Jesus as a dove, and in that moment, he knows who Jesus is. He recognizes him, and he gives thanks that he was where he needed to be so that he could encounter Jesus. He was in the place where God had sent him to be, doing the work that God had sent him to do. In faith he showed up. In faith he did prophetic work. And even if Jesus had not shown up when he did, John’s work was valid and transformative, for he was calling people back to God. There is never a wrong time for us to call one another away from hatred, greed and judgement. It is always good for us to remind one another of the ways in which God longs for us to walk: the paths of compassion, forgiveness and mercy.

But Jesus did show up and the one who had been unknown, became known to them.

According to Luke, Jesus was baptized by John, tested in the wilderness, and then returned to Nazareth, where on the Sabbath day he entered the synagogue. He was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus began to read from the text we heard today.

*The Lord God’s spirit is upon me,
    because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me
    to bring good news to the poor,
    to bind up the brokenhearted,
    to proclaim release for captives,
        and liberation for prisoners,
  to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

Of all the words within that scroll, Jesus chose these so that the people would know who he is and what he was sent to do among them, among us. Healing work. Hopeful work. Work which restores. Recovery from past trauma. Freedom from debt and the shame that accompanies it. A season of joy.

When the prophet, and now Jesus, speak of the year of the Lord’s favor, they are speaking of the Jubilee year. The captives to whom Isaiah spoke were “debt slaves…victims of financial misfortune [who] served other Israelites.” [[1]](#endnote-1) The legal traditions included releasing debt slaves every seven years, and returning lost ancestral lands every fifty so that no family would be lost into permanent impoverishment. These practices were never observed with regularity or consistency, but Jesus speaks these words once again as a vision. Pastor Glen Bell calls these words from Isaiah “the mission statement of the reign of God.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

And so I wonder: which miracle do you need to attend to in this moment? Do you need the miracle of a baby in a manger, a Messiah born in unexpected circumstances to ordinary people or the miracle of a man named John, who showed up with only faith to assure him that he was where he was supposed to be? Both are wonderful miracles!

Together they may help you clarify your own understandings of being one who is sent to be a witness.

This week, maybe it would be interesting to play with writing a personal mission statement. John’s was simple: my mission is to be a voice, to prepare the way for Immanuel.

Our knowledge of ourselves is ever unfolding. Our knowledge of God is – hopefully - ever unfolding as well. John’s gospel allows us to witness as those who journeyed with Jesus grew in their knowledge and understanding. Let’s lean into the process of becoming. As we allow ourselves to deepen and broaden our awareness of ourselves (with all of our delights and rough spots)and as we allow that awareness to be met by God’s love and welcome, we can experience greater wholeness.

Do you know who you are? You are a child of God, beloved and beautiful, created and sent to be a voice and a witness. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Connections, Year B. Vol. 1. p. 35. Third Sunday of Advent. Creach, Jerome. Westminster John Knox Press. 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, p. 36. Glen Bell. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)