

Advent III: John 1:6-8, 19-28, 1Thes 5:16-24, Isa 65:17-25  
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The Church of the Transfiguration  
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Last week, the Sunday School children and I created a model of the Jordan River.

We wrapped a bearded man in pretend animal skins and put him on the far side of the river.

He was our John the Baptist, who lived off the land, ate grasshoppers and wild honey,

And plunged believers into the waters of the river Jordan, baptizing them with repentance...and hope for a new way of life.

The girls didn't know this, but John the Baptist is my second favorite saint, right after Mary Magdalene.

John has the unique position of preparing us for a fully realized Christian faith.

When I entered the Order of Saint Helena it was the example of John the Baptist that became one of my most important teachers.

All four gospels present John as a first course in our Christian meal. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the theme of the baptizer is Repent, get Baptized, and Prepare for the coming of the Messiah who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of John pares this theme down to one ingredient:

Look for someone greater than I.

The John Baptist we meet in today's gospel is not called the baptizer at all, but the Forerunner.

He is the herald of Jesus' ministry and the first person in the gospel to witness to Jesus' hidden identity as the Son of God.

Today we are not specifically called to repent, but to look in the right direction for the coming of Christ. Apparently, it is easy to be confused.

As is typical of anything we read in the Gospel of John,

there are multiple layers to the story, and many ways to interpret them.

Adele Reinhartz, a Jewish scholar who wrote *a Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*, describes the hierarchical relationship between John as Witness and Jesus as the one to whom he witnesses. In this relationship it is necessary that John must decrease as Jesus increases. But what does this mean exactly?

It appears that when John baptized believers in the river Jordan they emerged from the water profoundly changed. Although John did witness to the coming power of Christ, Jesus hadn't arrived yet, and many chose to stay with John even after Jesus began his ministry.

We know that John had his own disciples who were in some ways competing with Jesus and his disciples. John and Jesus were both charismatic Jewish leaders who called their people to change so that God could renew their lives. Both John and Jesus baptized. Later on in John's gospel we read that the Pharisees worry because Jesus' disciples are baptizing more disciples than John.

Two holy men.

Two groups of disciples.

Two baptizers.

Two important movements within first century Judaism.

All four gospels *must* make it clear how these two movements differ from each other.

Our reading for today is from the very beginning of John's gospel, immediately following the famous opening hymn, "*In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God.*"

After we hear that, “*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it,*” John makes his appearance as the man sent from God in order to bear witness to the light.

John, the Forerunner. John, who was not the light.

This is where we pick up an important strand in John’s Gospel.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus is the one who declares “*I am.*”

*I am the light of the world, he says, I am the Gate,  
I am the Bread of Life, I am the True Vine, I am.*

We are meant to recall the voice from the burning bush as it cried out to Moses. “*I am the God of your ancestors.*” “*I am who I am.*”

“*Tell others, I am has sent me to you.*”

The repetition of *I am*’s is like a drum roll throughout the gospel.

You can’t miss it.

When we hear John the baptizer proclaim, “*I am Not,*” it prepares us for the wave of *I am*’s and the coming of *the One Who Is*.

In John, we, as the readers of the Gospel, are the ones who come to believe in the Christ, participating in the story as if we might not be clear who Jesus really is.

As the story unfolds, there are many who deny Jesus, others who are slow to catch on, and a few, like John the Baptizer, who recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, and point us in the right direction.

At the end of the story it is Thomas, who when invited to touch the wounded and resurrected Jesus, sees who Jesus is, as if for the first time, and is filled with profound belief as he proclaims,

“*My Lord and my God.*”

Apparently, even Jesus’ closest followers had difficulty seeing him.

John the baptizer has but one role to play in this story:

he simply points to Christ.

He is planted firmly where all wandering trails converge,

pointing the way for all of us.

John stands still in his place and he knows who he is. He is NOT GOD, but the first and primary witness to God in human form.

John's only job in this gospel is to witness to the Light coming into the dark world to save us from ourselves.

John's witness is full of promise because it contains the seeds of our Christian faith.

I am not the light, he says, I am here to testify to the light, so that *all* might believe through me.

Look where I am pointing and go there. I am not He.

But then, "*Who are you?*" ask the religious interrogators – which in John's Gospel is code for us, the readers – we are the interrogators.

"*Who are you?*" This question, "*Who are you?*" also appears repeatedly throughout the gospel. Who are you, Jesus? And who are you, John?

John says, "*I am not the messiah.*"

The Jewish faithful are looking for a messiah.

They know Isaiah's prophecies by heart,

and are expecting the coming of a kingdom like the one we heard about in our lesson from Isaiah, where

*"lions lie down with lambs, and where justice  
recreates Jerusalem as a joy,  
and its people as a delight."*

They are hungry for someone to appear who will reclaim Jerusalem and bring peace and good news to humankind.

Someone who attracts crowds of faithful around him,  
someone who baptizes, who prophesies,  
who leads people through the wilderness of a disordered life  
full of misguided people and diseased institutions.

Someone who might, possibly, be this John, baptizing believers far away from the corruption of the city, in the wild Jordan River.

Is it you, John the Baptist?

John answers, finally, by quoting Isaiah- *“I am a voice, only a voice, crying out in the wilderness, make straight the ways of the Lord!”*

John’s baptisms take second place to his function of witness.

He tells them,

*“There is one coming after me. You don’t know who he is yet.”*

*“I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals.”*

(And in John’s day,

even slaves were not asked to untie their master’s sandals.)

John says, *“My job is to tell you who is coming after me because who he is - is everything I am not.”*

John gives us these seeds for a radical Christian spirituality,

a spirituality based on the *I Am Not-ness* of John the Baptizer:

Believe in the Christ because he is the mystery of everything we are not.

John’s joy is – knowing he is not the Christ.

He is NOT God, and he knows this with a certainty that gives new purpose to his life.

By knowing who we are not, we become clearer about who Jesus is, and can begin to approach Jesus with deep awe and humility.

When I entered the Order of St. Helena I had recently emerged from a profound conversion experience.

After a painful divorce left me feeling empty, lost, and depressed,

I hungered for something I couldn’t name –

something I had been looking for all along,

but kept going about it in the wrong ways.

Unannounced, and during my private prayer,

I began to experience God in a completely new way.

I had been struggling to do everything right – I was a perfectionist,

and the end of a marriage made me feel

like I had done everything wrong.

As waves of loving forgiveness washed over me,  
I realized for the first time that I didn't have to be perfect.  
Only God was perfect, and I wasn't God.

I had a sense of being loved  
that was more tangible than anything I had ever felt before.  
I didn't have to earn God's love –  
it was washing over me like a waterfall –  
like being immersed in the Jordan River.  
I felt clean, forgiven and very different.  
I'm not God. I'm just a person. I can make mistakes.  
It left me with the feeling of profound gratitude.

I'm just a human.  
And God is more loving than I could ever have imagined.  
How does one respond to such radical and unsolicited love?  
Well, entering a religious order made complete sense to me.  
But what happened to me after I entered was not at all what I expected.

I had another conversion,  
but this time it was through the ministry of my sisters.  
Day after day, I participated in the Eucharist  
with one of my 5 sister-priests presiding at the altar.

I had grown up in the Episcopal Church,  
but had never experienced women priests.  
I thought I had entered a religious order to serve God,  
But I was the one being served –  
by women at our altar, women preaching, and women leading.  
Experiencing women as priests, teachers, and preachers  
made a powerful impression on me.  
I was drawn into the desire to become a priest like them – a sister/priest.  
Never had I known such a thing existed.  
And now that I knew, no one could put the genie back in the bottle.

Like John the Baptist's disciples,  
I was changed through a baptism in the waters of God's forgiveness,  
And then, after I had been pointed in the right direction,  
I found the image of Christ in my sisters.

*"Rejoice always,"* Paul says, in his letter to the Thessalonians,  
*"Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances,  
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

These are the words of a mystic,  
whose life had been transformed by the radical otherness  
of Christ's love for him, and for his people.  
Paul, the mystic, tells a favorite Christian community  
to say its prayers with joy and without ceasing,  
even as they are being persecuted.  
And especially when they feel hopeless and depressed.  
You never know when God will turn your life upside down.

The key to our salvation  
lies in our continual knowledge that we are not God.  
We cannot fix the world, we cannot make others behave,  
we cannot recognize the face of Christ among us  
without the help of the Holy Spirit,  
swirling around us,  
and drawing us out of ourselves and into the arms of God.

We are promised that Jesus,  
the Messiah revealed to us  
in the humility of a babe in a feeding trough,  
will come to us in intimacy and love  
when we remember who he is, and who we are not.

And we need each other to remind ourselves to  
*"Rejoice always, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us."*