

Advent 3B Sermon on John 1:6-8; 19-28 “Look Away and Lose Thyself!”
December 10th/11th, 2011

Grace and peace to you all from out God and Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we heard a little bit about John the Baptizer, how he came to prepare the way of the Lord, how he came to prepare the way for the Gospel. Last week we heard about how he would baptize people in the Jordan River, how wore clothes made out of camel hair, and how he ate locusts and wild honey. Well this week we get to see John the Baptizer in action again, however, in John’s gospel we notice that John (following me still?) is not known for baptizing but is known for witnessing, for confessing, for testifying, all the while using his long, bony finger to point everyone away from himself and to Jesus Christ, the Word who has become flesh, the eternal Son of God who was given to us because God so loves the world, the child who was born in a manger to be crucified for our sin and raised for our justification 30 some years later. Two main themes then that will thread their ways throughout this sermon are looking away from ourselves and the important issue of identity.

There’s something really special about this John the Witnesser though. And what is so special about this John is that he points everyone away from himself, using that long, bony finger of his. And I say this because we live in a day and age where everything has to be all about “me.” We are very selfish people and if things were up to us instead of God, we wouldn’t have the earth revolve around the sun, we would want the sun to revolve around us. If things were up to us, we would want a God who isn’t sovereign and in control of everything that is seen and unseen (what we testify to in the Nicene Creed), we would want a God simply exists to make us happy, fulfilling every wish and desire that we have. If things were up to us, even if we wanted or need

a God, that God would only be there to make us feel good about ourselves. Because, after all, if there is one thing that we love to hear it is that we are all so darn special.

John the Witnesser, however, has something different to say to us. John the Witnesser has some most uncomfortable news. What John does for us is to get us to look away from ourselves and to Jesus Christ the Lord. And John knows why: Because as soon as we start looking at ourselves we either get so excited that we are such a magnificent person, or we get thrown into total and utter despair because deep down we know who we truly are. This happened to John himself being tested on who he was.

In the gospel reading we see that some Jewish priests and Levites came to see what the big deal was about this John fellow. They asked him three questions: “Are you the Messiah, the Christ?” John says no. “Are you then Elijah?” Again, John says no. “Are you then a prophet,” they ask him? And again John responds simply with a no. Then they ask him a final question: “Then who the heck are you? What do you have to say about yourself?” And John simply tells them that “I am a voice. That’s it. I’m just a voice telling you where you need to put all your hope and trust. Don’t look at me, I’m nothing special. However, I do have to tell you about someone who is coming after me, someone so perfect and righteous that I am not worthy to untie or shine his shoes.” So you see in this dialogue that John has with these priests John two important things: He confesses that he’s nothing special, and he points the priests and the Levites, using that long, bony finger of his, to Christ Jesus the Lord. And not only that, but he tells them that he is right in their midst and they still don’t even know him.

And that is major reason why you all called me here to be your pastor almost 9 months ago – to simply be a voice and a finger that points you again and again to Jesus Christ our risen Lord. My job is not to point my finger at you and say, “Look at yourself, look at someone else who’s living a godly life, do the same as them.” And it’s not my job to say, “Look at yourself, now look at me; do your best to live like I do.” And you will never hear me say this to you: “Well, I know that there is some good hidden somewhere in you. Don’t you see it? Maybe if you dig deep, deep down you’ll find some sort of goodness in yourself that you can hold onto as your own. In fact, look right there, right at your belly button, your true self should be located right around there!” No, my job week in and week out, day in and day out, is to do what John the Witnesser did: Use my finger and my mouth to point you away from yourself and to Christ Jesus, the lamb of God who took away the sin of the world, the lamb of God who took away your sin.

Like I said earlier, another common thread in this passage is one of identity, or perhaps even better is who you identify yourself with. All people suffer from an identity crisis, some more than others. Men, women, children, teenagers, young adults, elderly, it doesn’t matter, all people suffer from an identity crisis. We can see it most profoundly in teenagers, as they figure out who they are in this crazy and broken world that is passing away, associating themselves with other teenagers that talk, or look, or act like them, and if they don’t do that, they’ll simply fall in line with some social group so they aren’t ostracized. A lot of those groups really haven’t changed over the years; jocks, nerds, hipsters, the popular crowd, the crowd that is looked at as trash or are called trash because of what kind of house they live in or the family situation they find themselves in. But as one of my friends found at our recent high school reunion, things don’t really change too much as you get older. Birds of a feather always flock together. Or we can

look at the parents and adults who are in their 30's or 40's or 50's, and the same thing tends to happen. You associate yourself with people who are like you, "you" being whoever it is you think you are, or perhaps "you" being whoever you would like to be. The fact remains: "Like likes like." Or like I said before, birds of a feather flock together.

So as people of faith, as followers of the crucified and risen Lord, who do we identify ourselves with or who do we find our identity in? Or to be even more specific, who do you find your identity in? Will you find an identity if you look deep within yourself? Sure, but that identity is full of pride, selfishness, and sin. Will you find an identity if you hang out with people who are like you? Sure, but that identity is still full of pride, selfishness, and sin because heaven forbid you let someone who is different for you and your troupe get in to your "inner circle." So where will you find yourself in the crazy and mixed up world that is passing away? Not in yourself, or in other people, and certainly not in me. Look away from yourself and to Christ Jesus, the person who John the Witnesser pointed to, the God-Man that I point you to each and every week. Even better, look away from yourself and lose yourself in Christ Jesus because the old you that still clings to your neck and bones is good for nothing. Lose yourself in Christ Jesus so that God can give you a new self, give you a new you, make you into a new creature, to make you into a new creation. For those of you who have been baptized, God began this work already through that Water and with that promise given to you in baptism, and He continues that work in you, daily and weekly putting to death the old you to give life to the new you by you hearing the Gospel being testified and witnessed to, and by you receiving Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine in the sacrament of Communion.

This is a most interesting truth to say the least. That in the very death of ourselves, in the loss of who we think we are or who we would like to be, we receive life and a new identity in Jesus Christ, an identity in which we are forgiven and loved by the God, and identity in which you are forgiven and loved by the God who created and sustains everything we can and cannot see. And all of this comes by us simply looking away from ourselves and believing that Jesus Christ is the Truth, the Way, and the Life. The Truth because he truly died and was raised for you, the Way because he is the only Way for us to be given our true selves, and the Life because only by dying in him and losing everything we think we are, do we truly live as people empowered and made new by the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may you daily look away from yourselves, and you can use your own bony finger to remind yourself, may you daily look away from yourselves and to the one who purchased your redemption on that blood soaked cross 2000 years ago and who promises to come again one day soon. Amen.

Note: To give credit where credit is due, parts of the above sermon was influenced by this sermon preached 6 years ago by a Lutheran pastor in Maine.

<http://lcrwtvl.org/2005/12/sermon-who-are-you-john-119-28-3rd-sunday-in-advent/#more-75>