

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B

“Who do you think you are?” That might be a better rendering of the question the messengers from the high priest and the Pharisees brought to John the Baptist. They say “who are you?” but the follow-up questions are demanding from John that he give an account of himself.

He doesn't do a very good job of that. He says more about who he is not than who he is. He starts with the fact that he is not the Messiah. In the end, he describes himself as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” an ancient quote from the prophet Isaiah.

John is calling for all his hearers to make that way straight, and he's showing them how to do it at the same time. The main method he uses is to not get in the way. He knows what his job is, and he sticks to it. He avoids the accolades that come with being a sensation out there by the Jordan, and focuses on proclaiming one coming after him, who is already in their midst, and not even whose sandal he is worthy to untie.

John is all about proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom in the person of the as yet unnamed Messiah.

As we approach the Feast of Christmas, this is a good occasion to consider the ways and means that we share that same good news. Probably not too overtly, for fear that the message would fail to come across for being too commonplace.

But there are still ways to impress upon those we encounter the awesomeness of God becoming one

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with us, one of us.

One of my favorite stories from the world's wisdom tradition brings this possibility across.

It has to do with a monastery which had fallen on hard times. The monks did not talk with one another; there were no new, young monks, and people had stopped coming for spiritual solace and direction.

In the woods near the monastery a rabbi lived in a small hut. Occasionally, the monks would see the rabbi walking in the woods and they were taken by him, wondering what he was like.

The abbot was distraught at the decline of the monastery. He had prayed and pondered over the situation and had admonished the mood and behavior of the monks. Nothing had worked.

One day he saw the rabbi walking in the woods and decided to go and ask his advice. He walked up behind the rabbi. The rabbi turned, and when the abbot and the rabbi faced one another, both began to weep.

The sorrow of the situation affected them deeply. The abbot knew that he did not have to explain the decline of the monastery. He merely asked, "Can you give me some direction so the monastery will thrive again?"

The rabbi said, "One of you is the Messiah." Then he turned and continued to walk in the woods.

The abbot returned to the monastery. The monks had seen him talking to the rabbi and they asked, "What

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did the rabbi say?”

One of us is the Messiah,” the abbot said the words slowly, almost incredulously.

The monks began talking to one another, “One of us? Which one? Is it Brother John? Or perhaps it is Brother Andrew? Could it even be the abbot?”

Slowly things began to change at the monastery. the monks began to look for the Messiah in each other and listen to each other’s words for the Messiah’s voice.

Soon new, younger monks joined, and people returned to the monastery for spiritual solace and direction.

John the Baptist knew the Messiah was in the midst of his people, that the time promised from ages past had arrived. He gave himself over to it, let nothing get in the way of it.

We have it on good authority that the Messiah, Jesus, makes his presence known to us in the faces of those we meet, if we are looking and have the eyes to see. Those eyes are not blinded by self-interest or forgetting what happens when God gives himself to us.

If we take seriously what we say is the truth, that God has claimed us as his people and made us into the body of Christ, that’s all the reason we need to treat one another with reverence for the Christ who dwells within.

That in itself has power enough to change the world.