

ADVENT III

They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." John 1:25-27

I love Advent, and as most of you know, I love the Baptizer. And part of the reason I love Advent is that two of our Advent gospels feature the old curmudgeon.

Today's Gospel, from John, pays more attention to what John actually says than any of the others. But a lot of what is said about the Baptizer, including by himself, is negative.

There's an historic explanation for this. Some of the Baptizer's followers evidently thought he was superior to Jesus, and rivalry developed between the two groups. The John partisans staked their belief, in part anyway, on the fact that Jesus was baptized by John; they thought that meant that Jesus was ceding authority to John. The baptism was felt, by Matthew and Luke, to be an awkwardness, and they downplay the Baptizer's significance by explaining or ignoring it.

John's Gospel takes a different approach: go negative. The Gospelist is unequivocal: the Baptizer is not the light. And the Baptizer himself is emphatic: he is not Elijah, he is not the prophet, he is not the Messiah. Let's get the roles definite, the boundaries firm. And he's clear as well about the hierarchy of holiness: he is not worthy to untie the thong of Jesus sandal.

All this seems agenda-driven, and unsurprising to us today, since we gather, 2000 years down the line, not to worship the John the Baptizer, but Jesus, the Christ. What is, to me at least, surprising, mysterious, and wonderful, is something else in the Baptizer's speech: *Among you stands one whom you do not know.*

Among you stands one whom you do not know. Now this could be a simply literal statement: Jesus is standing somewhere in the crowd of John's followers and he's an unknown; they do not know him. But the announcement signals a theme that will be important throughout John's Gospel, where Jesus remains one whom people either do not know or do not understand.

In John's Gospel, Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman understand his words but not their meaning. The high priest understands him only as a threat to the status quo. Pilate gives him the right title, but for the wrong reasons. Even the disciples repeatedly demonstrate their misunderstandings.

And in the Gospel of Mark, which we read throughout the year, Jesus' identity is always a mystery unfolding but never fully known: is he the Messiah, or not? There's no resurrection in Mark, remember, no resolution of the so-called Messianic secret.

Among you stands one whom you do not know.

For all the negative things the Baptizer says about himself, what he says about Jesus is positive. Jesus is more powerful than John, more worthy. And he is one who is unknown.

Throughout the Gospels. characters who encounter Jesus serve mostly to reveal or illuminate some aspect of him: he's a teacher, a preacher, a healer, an iconoclast, a threat. These characters reflect back Jesus in one

dimension. And just so, his encounters with others serve to highlight some aspect of our human nature and emotions: suffering, neediness, yearning for spiritual teaching and healing, cynicism, fear. By the end of four Gospels we've been served a rather full picture of humanity's strengths and weaknesses.

But do we have an equally full picture of Jesus? *Among you stands one whom you do not know.* I believe that, to this day, the Baptizer's pronouncement stands as a challenge to all of us who presume to know who Jesus is. An innocent infant? A revolutionary leader? A dispenser of salvation? A trickster? A spiritual guru? A friend? A fraud? A perfect man? A perfect God?

People have claimed all these names for him, and many, many, more. We all know, or know of, people who announce with utmost conviction: *Jesus is my Lord and Savior.* They think they know what they mean by this; and our tendency may be to resist and perhaps resent their certainty. But what about our own certainties? Do we have any? Are we particularly attached to one image or face of Jesus? As revolutionary, perhaps. Or as socialist. Or as infant— infants are fairly non-threatening.

Or, as I know some of you here feel, is Jesus a source of *uncertainty* and even discomfort? People say that to me apologetically: *I'm not sure about Jesus.*

And what do I always say back? That's okay! That's just fine! As a matter of fact, I believe that's the most faithful stance we can take toward the Nazarene. Because it's a startling fact: Jesus continues, always, to appear in ways that are surprising, mysterious, and even unwelcome.

As the stories have it, the gentle baby of the Nativity story will soon mature into the man who will dis his own family, berate his disciples, challenge religious authority, overthrow the Temple's status quo, offer people teachings that seem to make little sense, and finally provoke the government to sanctioned execution.

Always surprising, always revealing, and never known.

I said to Sam in some exasperation last week, "Jesus was a very complicated, very interesting man. And so many people who write about him are NOT!"

And that's why I love Jesus, despite much boring theology and piety surrounding him. More, even, than I love the Baptizer, who's also complicated and interesting. But Jesus, much more so. I guess that's why he's never worn out his welcome in our hearts, all these centuries.

And so this Advent, we prepare our hearts once again, to welcome him: the one who stands among us, and is unknown.

Amen.

