

Sermon for Advent 3B
Sunday, December 17, 2023
“Who are you?”

Text: John 1:6-28

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning we are celebrating *Gaudete* Sunday, also known as Rose Sunday. “*Gaudete*” is a Latin word that means ‘rejoice.’ “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, rejoice.” Those words come from Paul’s letter to the Philippians and are the words of the introit appointed for the day—words that open the mass and prepare us for worship. We rejoice because we know Jesus the Christ, we know who we are, and we are testifiers to his light in our lives.

For 11 AM. In the book *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice finds herself in a strange fantasy world where she is as short as a blade of grass and the animals and insects talk. While she explores this strange world, she gets hungry and goes looking for something to eat. She comes across a mushroom that’s slightly larger than she is, and as she stretches on her tiptoes to see what’s on top of the mushroom, she notices a hookah-smoking caterpillar. Alice and the caterpillar lock eyes for a few moments of silence while they size each other up, until finally, the caterpillar stops smoking and breaks the silence with the question, “Who are *you*?” The rest of the chapter centers around the dialog between Alice and the caterpillar in which she explores who she is and who she isn’t. This chapter of *Alice in Wonderland* is about identity.

Today’s gospel passage is about identity, particularly the identity of a guy who lives in the wilderness and baptizes people—a guy with the same name as the gospel writer: John. In this opening chapter of the gospel according to John the Evangelist, instead of finding a story of expectant parents waiting the birth of their son who is to be the Messiah, we are introduced to John who baptizes. We are told in advance two things about John. He himself is not the light, but that he is an important person because he testifies *to* the light. He directs our attention to the light. Like Alice in the story of her adventures in Wonderland, John is asked by some priests and Levites the question, “Who are you?” The Messiah? No. Elijah? Not him either. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. John makes it clear that his purpose, his identity is merely to set the stage for the greater one who is to come—someone so great that John is not worthy “to untie the thong of his sandal.”

John’s statement of identity was important to those he was baptizing—his own disciples—so that they knew that he was not the one they were waiting for, but that the long-awaited Messiah was coming soon. John’s identity was important to the first readers of the written gospel nearly a century later who were struggling with their own identity. Some of them still claimed that they were disciples of John the Baptizer, but the gospel made it clear that Jesus was the light, not John; that Jesus was the Word of

God made flesh and who lived among us. It was the message of Jesus to which they were to testify.

Who are *you*? These days we find ourselves having to claim an identity in so many ways: personal identity—our name, familial identity, national identity, political identity, religious identity, gender identity, sexual identity. We are constantly having to tell others who we are—we have to state our identity—who we are and, often, who we aren't. Who are you? What are the labels that you find yourself using to state your identity? A mother, father, child of someone, doctor, lawyer, priest, friend, confidant, enemy? And, of course, there is your name: the label that gives you personhood, the first thing that makes you unique among everybody else. All too often these days people use their identity is used as a way to point fingers, to lay blame, to demonize, to dehumanize. And sadly, we humans use our identity of religion, culture, and race to justify violence and violent acts. That is not a good display of our identities.

The gospel takes our identity to a new level. The gospel brings us into a new reality of who we are. We're not identified just by our names, labels, or other characteristics. We're not even identified simply by calling ourselves Christian, but the gospel informs us that as Christians, we are testifiers to the light. We are to be testifiers of the good news of Jesus Christ—how through him, our lives are changed, how we handle life from day to day, whatever we have to face in our lives, and how we survive. The gospel helps us understand that we are to serve as testifiers that God once came to live among us as Jesus the Christ who showed us a better way to live. Our testimony of who we are is a testimony of humility; our identity as Christians is not intended for our own edification, as our human identities often lead to; rather by our Christian identity, we point to Jesus the Christ. We know him and we make him known. As testifiers to the light, we help others around us see that they, too, have an identity—that they matter, that they are valued, and that they are loved by God. Our identity as Christians calls on us to be examples of how the message of the Christ offers hope to the world that tries to use identity for selfish gain. We are bringers of the light. In other words, we are to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ, testifiers to the light, and in so doing we share the light of Christ within us. That light brings hope, peace, and joy in the world.

And if your light is flickering, or you feel like your light is dimming, as members of Christ's body, we get a recharge in the Holy Eucharist, in which we partake of his Body and Blood, his Real Presence, and once again, he becomes a part of us and we become a part of him (he dwells in us and we in him), so that we can let our light shine in the world. Whatever we do, wherever we go, we must let our light shine. Why? Because Jesus gave us that light. Amen.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Resources

<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/12/advent-3-b-sacred-leadership/>

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3494