

Third Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
13 December 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I remember playing a game when I was a child. I believe you call it “Catch,” but we called it, “Not it!” The game is played by a group of 8 to 10 children. One member of the group is isolated from the group, while the rest gather in the middle of a field, huddled together to conceal our voices. We then assign one of us to be “It.” Once “It” is selected the catcher is given a signal and he chases the other players. When he touches a particular player, that player is frozen in place. The catcher then asks them a question: “Are you it?” If the child is the assigned “it,” they say, “I am it” and the game is over. A new game then begins, and a new catcher is assigned. But if they are not “it,” they say, “Not it.” The player remains frozen in place and the catcher runs to catch another player, and then another, and another, until “It” is found. What makes the game exciting is that whoever is “it” could come, unnoticed by the catcher, and touch any of the frozen children, freeing them to rejoin the game.

I remembered this silly game this week, as I read the Gospel of John. The Pharisees send their messengers to interview a rather strange character, who has come to enjoy a great deal of recognition lately. He dresses in strange clothing, speaks enigmatic words, and eats insects and wild honey. Yet, he is one of the most popular preachers they have heard of in recent history. In fact, he is so famous that they want to know if he is “it.” Could this man be a prophet of old somehow returned to Israel? Could this be Elijah himself, who according to their Scriptures was to precede the coming of the Messiah? Could he be the Messiah?

John does not deny that he is a messenger, but he denies being a prophet, like Isaiah or Ezekiel. He denies being the Elijah type returned. And he affirms that he is not the Messiah. He is not “It.” He is not the light, but he came to testify about the light and to point to it. He is not the Messiah, but he came to prepare the way for the Messiah. He is not the freedom the world awaits, but he is here to point to that freedom. Not the Savior, but he is here to point to that Savior. He is not “It.” He is not the one destined of old to unfreeze the world, to remove hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh, to liberate people from the sin that keeps them stuck in place, locked in their own desperation, unable to move forward. He

is not the one given to the world to break the chains of sin and addiction; to provide freedom from shame, guilt, and doubt; and to lead people into a life filled with grace, forgiveness, and hope. He is not “It!”

Those questioning John this morning are so exasperated by his answers that they exclaim, ““Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” They want to know why he is doing what he is doing, if he is not the one who was to come. But John is clear about his proper role in Salvation history. His baptism is not a baptism of salvation. His baptism is a baptism of repentance in preparation for the true baptism, the baptism of the Christ. John knows that there is a Messiah, and he knows he is not it. His vocation is to be a traffic sign, a flashing arrow pointing to the one. His job is to help people find Jesus and then to get out of the way. He knows that he needs to decrease, so Jesus might increase in people’s lives.

I believe John gives all of us an incredible lesson today, especially anyone engaged in Christian ministry. We live in an era of hero worship; we are all looking for super-heroes. I must confess that sometimes I fall for it myself. I come across a favorite theology author and I become as giddy as child with a new toy. I have friends who speak of their pastors in much more favorable terms than they do Christ himself. I know pastors who are so polished in everything they do and say, that it is very clear they place themselves at the center of their message. It is as though they are the person people are coming to see. The spotlight shines on them. They are the purveyors of hope and the entertainers of the masses.

Today, John reminds us that we, pastors, are not “It!” At best we are called to be traffic signs, pointing the way to the Messiah. We are not the Messiah, regardless of how polished our message is, how attractive our buildings and worship spaces are, how expensive our communication systems, how impressive our choirs, how entertaining our sermons, and how comforting our message. We are not the Savior. It is not us people are coming to see. It is Jesus Christ of Nazareth our people are coming to see. Without Christ there is nothing of substance we can give a hurting world. We are not “It,” whether we are wearing a 10 K suit or a simple tunic. Christ is and will forever be the one people are coming to see. He is the one! And it is a complete mystery to me that a simple, broken, and limited person like a preacher or a teacher can be used by God to be the traffic sign pointing to the Messiah.

But lest I leave any of you off the hook, let me tell you that behind every problem-solver, every person who “must-be-everything- for everybody- everywhere- and every time,” behind every fixer... there may be a Messiah-complex in hiding. Many of us become such fixers of other people’s problems that, by doing so, we take the place of the Messiah. We become the center of attention, we become the only source of comfort or help, we become co-dependent on those we help. Let me repeat that our job as Christians is to point the way and to lead others to the only answer to their pain. Christ is the only source of hope and the only fountain of recovery, restoration, and life. Our job is to show the way and point to the Savior, and then get out of the way.

My friends, I recently read that “Heaven needs Messengers.” I believe this to be true. In fact, the word “Apostle” means to be “sent out.” To be a disciple of Jesus is to be his messenger to the world. Without us many would never hear about the Gospel of Salvation. But it is not our message we deliver, but his message. It is not our baptism we offer, but his baptism. It is not our salvation we offer, but his.

I pray that as we become Christ’s messengers, we may fall in love with his message once again. I pray we will deliver the message of his love to others who need to hear it. And I pray that we may be faithful to the message as delivered to our forefathers and as found in Scripture.

May God continue to bless you this Advent Season. Amen!