

“ ‘Not Me but JC,’ says John the B.”

Advent 3

John 1:6-8, 19-28

As someone who spent a few years in sales, getting people to talk was a big part of my job. I needed information from my customers. What were their needs? What were their concerns or frustrations with their current products? And as most of us know, the way to get information is to ask questions. Of course what type of questions one asks is crucial for moving things along. Closed ended questions, which are typically those that have yes or no answers like, “Are you considering purchasing in the next two months?” are certainly part of the process when trying to gain information. But it’s those open-ended questions that can really get the customer talking. A question like, “What do you perceive will be the biggest challenge for your business this year compared to last year,” requires more than a simple short response. Because generally, open ended questions are the “where,” “what,” “why,” and “how” questions. They are the questions that when asked in the right way can lead to actual conversation. But this type of questioning doesn't always work.

In studying our Gospel reading this week from John Chapter 1, it dawned on me that the questions asked by the priests and Levites to John the Baptist didn't produce much conversation at all. They weren't bad questions but his short answers kind of remind me of one of our kids when we ask what she did at school. A lot of times we get what she didn't do. “What did we do dad? Well, we didn't get to go outside.” That’s a common answer from a particularly cute first grader in our family. To John, the priests ask, “Who are you?” “Me?” answers John. Well, let me tell you who I’m not. I’m not the Christ. I’m not Elijah. I’m not the prophet who Moses promised would be one and same as the Christ. All these guys could squeeze out of John the Baptist was who he isn’t.

Of course, this had to have been frustrating for the delegation sent from Jerusalem. So they try one more time. “Give us something. We have to give an answer to those who sent us. Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”

“Me?” John seems to say. “I don't have anything to say about myself.” But Isaiah did. Isaiah called me a voice out in the wilderness, crying, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

I can just hear the Jerusalem contingent's reaction. "A voice?" Did he say he was just a voice? A voice calling for folks to get ready for the coming of the Lord?" Yep, that's what I heard too. The man said he was just a voice.

And they press on. So, if you're not the Christ, or Elijah, or the prophet, who gave you the authority to baptize? John's answer at first really doesn't sound like an answer at all. He says, "I baptize with water but among you stands one you do not know. It is he who, coming after me, who is preferred. It is he whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."

That's John's answer. The one among them they don't yet recognize is the one who has authorized John to preach and invite people to repentance. This is the one who is much greater than John because he was before him. Jesus may have been born 6 months or so after but John knows that Jesus is the one who was before all ages. He is the one through whom all things were made; he is the word made flesh who dwells among us.

And look at what that one has come to do. He didn't come among us to be served but he came among us in order to serve us. The Baptismal waters flow only by his authority. And what that water grants is nothing less than the washing of our sins and freedom from those sin's power over our lives.

John was content to be nothing but a voice announcing the coming of the one who serves us by taking away the sin of the world. That was his thing. It was what defined his life. He didn't come to talk about himself. Trust me, he certainly could have if he wanted to. Because he too was kind of a miracle baby, remember? His parents Zechariah and Elizabeth were "advanced in years." Elizabeth was barren! Yet God sent the angel Gabriel to them even before he appeared to Mary informing the happy old couple that they were to have a son and they were to call him John.

That's quite the story but John didn't come to answer a bunch of questions about himself. He was sent to talk about the greater one who comes to be our Savior. As the sermon title says, "it's not about me but JC says John the B. And that's a good model for all Christians to follow isn't it? Yes, we should share our stories and experiences as Christians with others but give credit where credit is due. We follow the Savior of the world and he should intentionally be part of the conversation. And of course, we should not just talk about Jesus but love and serve others in his name.

Last weekend, one of our church members shared with me a story that really touched my heart and I want to share the highlights with you. She told me of someone she knew who was in a terrible car accident. Because of that accident, she was having a really hard time physically, emotionally, and financially. This person reached out to our church member, whom she had recently met, in a panic a couple of weeks ago because on top of all she was going through, her hot water heater went out. She didn't have the money to replace it. She didn't even know who she could call to fix it. In fact, that's why she reached out- not to ask for money but to ask for the name of a plumber. This couple in our church happened to know of a reputable plumber and contacted him on this lady's behalf. This man got all the information he needed. He delivered and installed the hot water heater at the lady's house. When he was done, he handed the lady the bill. The lady turned it over expecting to see a few hundred dollars but to her surprise what she found was not a detailed explanation of the charges. What she found were the words "Jesus is your strength in times of trouble" written across the top. And at the bottom of the bill? The letters N/C. No charge. This man gave credit where credit is due. He focused on Jesus and in turn his words and actions allowed this woman, who so desperately needed help, to focus on him as well.

That's why John the Baptist's words are so important for us today. He is doing us a favor by focusing the talk on Jesus because that's who the church should always focus on. The Church is not about us. It's always about Christ. He is one who came among us as one of us so he could serve all of us. He took our sins. He died our death that we all deserve and by overcoming the grave, he opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Advent is over half over, and the joy of Christmas will soon be upon us. And so once again John the Baptist does us the service yet again this year of focusing all the joy of the Church entirely in Jesus. His words should remind us that the joy of the coming days is not found in presents from the mall or from *Amazon Prime* or in the parties or gatherings we might attend- blessings though they are. His words remind us that soon, we celebrate the wonder of the birth of the Christ. We'll sing songs of greetings and praise that he came among us. But most of all, we'll rejoice in *why* he came among us.

Sometimes, the familiar passages of the season become a little too familiar don't they? Sometimes we go through the routine of reading the words of those like John the Baptist and forget to pause and contemplate just how significant they are. John teaches us that the joy of the Church, and the joy of each of our lives, is found only in the one in

which there is forgiveness of sins. The one whose sandals we are unworthy to tie and yet the one who is among us- Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the only gift that any of us really need and the one gift none of us can live without. **Amen.**