Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

John 11:6-8, 19-28

One of my favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*. If I’m scrolling through the channel guide and come across it, I’ll almost always stop to watch it. It’s as comforting to me as a bowl of macaroni and cheese or a cozy sweater.

The other day, I read an article that suggests that one of the characters, Inigo Montoya, can teach us how to network successfully. It pointed to a scene from near the end of the movie when Inigo finally meets the man he has sought for years, the evil Count Rugen.

Step 1: He greets the count. “Hello.” Step 2: He introduces himself. “My name is Inigo Montoya.” In step 3, he establishes that they have a relationship through another person. “You killed my father.” And then, in step 4, he concludes by managing expectations for the relationship. “Prepare to die.”

John the Baptist seems to have taken the opposite approach in our Gospel text for today. When the Jewish leadership asked him who he was, he told them who he *wasn’t*.

“Are you the Messiah?” “No.

“Are you Elijah?” “No.”

“Are you the prophet?” “No.”

Finally, they either run out of questions or out of patience, because they ask, “Who are you? What do you say about yourself?”

John offers his testimony. “I’m the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

John may not have nailed the rest of the greeting the way Inigo Montoya did, but he definitely set expectations when he said that the one coming after him was who they should be looking for.

In the Gospel of John, the person we usually call John the Baptist is more like John the Witness, because in this Gospel, we don’t hear that John baptizes Jesus. Instead, his job is akin to the guy on the street corner twirling a sign that points you to a store having a sale. John the Witness prepared the way of the Lord by getting people’s attention so they would notice Jesus.

And, really, that’s our job as disciples, too. A core part of discipleship is the *reason* for what we do, and that reason is our faith, the trust we place in the promises we find in the Bible. The promises that through Christ Jesus, God chooses to declare us holy and beloved, rather than count our sins against us, that God sends the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide us, and that God is at work, bringing God’s plans for all of creation to fruition.

John the Witness offers us a model for faithful discipleship and, at least in this account, it doesn’t include eating wild locusts.

John’s testimony is “pubic, certain, and humble.”[[1]](#footnote-1) At no point in any of the four Gospels does John appear shy in sharing his message. He’s absolutely certain of what he tells the people. And he’s insistent that it’s not about him, that he’s not even worthy to untie the thong of Jesus’ sandal.

John knew what his job was, and he did it with certainty and humility, and he serves as an example of faithful discipleship for us. For John, that begins with his testimony.

I know that the moment I start talking about being witnesses to the gospel, about offering testimony to our faith, somebody is bound to start feeling nervous. In a culture that increasingly sees faith as a private matter, the notion of talking about our faith to someone else can be deeply uncomfortable.

For many of us, a big part of the problem is not feeling like we’re equipped to talk about faith in a way that we think will be sufficient.

While I’m certainly an advocate of studying the Bible and the Small Catechism, perhaps we put too much pressure on ourselves when we worry about not knowing enough about our faith. Jesus did not deliver extended, deep theological treatises that outlined specific things to believe. He didn’t leave behind scrolls outlining doctrine.

Jesus kept things simple. He said, “Trust in me” and “love God and love your neighbor as yourselves.” And then he did things to show us how to love our neighbors. And he did things to show us God’s love.

By trusting in Jesus’ words, we recognize that God is doing the heavy lifting, not us. God has taken care of our salvation. And that frees us to focus on the “love God and love your neighbor as yourself” part, rather than living in fear that God is keeping score or that God is looking for ways to punish us.

When we focus on living out the Great Commandment, *that’s* our witness, *that’s* our testimony. We don’t have to know all the big, fancy theological words or have large portions of Scripture memorized to be able to communicate our understanding of God.

Because, really, faith isn’t about *understanding* God. It’s about *trusting* God. Perhaps there’s no greater witness we can give than to act on that trust, using the example of Christ’s life as our guide for living our own lives.

All four Gospels tell us that John’s role was to prepare the way of the Lord.

That’s what discipleship is. Preparing the way of the Lord. As we wait with anticipation for Christ’s return, the ways we share God’s love with others are how we prepare the way of the Lord. When we love our neighbor as ourselves, when we work for peace and justice, when we welcome the stranger and feed the hungry, we make the road a little smoother and a little straighter. And when we share God’s love with our neighbor, we bring more light into the darkness.

While John the Evangelist speaks of Jesus as the light coming into the world, the light that shines in the darkness, Jesus himself tells us in Matthew’s Gospel that *we* are the light of the world, and that he expects us to let our light shine before others, not so we can receive glory, but so that others see what we do and give glory to God.

We are called to prepare the way of the Lord, to bear witness to the light that offers hope in the darkness, and we are called to *be* the light so others may have hope.

May it be so for us.

1. Mark Allan Powell, commentary on John 1:6-8, 19-28, December 14, 2014, *workingpreacher.org* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)