

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/17/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 17th

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Jesus is the way, John is the signpost

Last week the lectionary focused on Mark's introduction of John the Baptist. This week's lectionary for the Third Sunday of Advent offers a rather different treatment of John the Baptist by the Fourth Gospel. Last week the emphasis was on the positive things that John said about Jesus, this week the emphasis is on the negative things John said about himself. Some argue the Fourth Gospel, in contrast to the synoptics, is a polemic against John the Baptist. Why the difference? What relevance has this for us?

John 1:6-8, 19-28 Commentary

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

These three verses stand out and disrupt the poetic structure of the Prologue (vv.1-18). Unlike the other Gospels, there is no reference to John being the "the Baptist" or "the Baptizer." He is simply introduced as John. This is because no other John is specifically named in the entire Gospel. Even John the brother of James, a member of Jesus' inner circle, is not mentioned by name. John is presented as a man who was sent from God. In the Old Testament, such a description usually refers to a prophet (e.g. 2 Chronicles 24:19). John's purpose was to bear witness about the light. *The Logos* was identified as "the light of men" in v.4. John (the Gospel writer) ensures there is no misunderstanding about who is the light and clarifies that John (the Baptist) was not the light but the one who would bear witness to the light.

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

When the priests and Levites came from Jerusalem to determine the identity of John the Baptist, they asked John who he was. He replied that he was not the Christ. He proactively denied he was the Christ before they asked him if he was the Christ. The author here is clearly trying to ensure there is no misunderstanding here - John (the Baptist) was not the Christ.

²¹ *And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."*

The priests and Levites must have expected John to claim that he was the Messiah. They now ask about two other great figures that were predicted to come in the last days: Elijah and "the Prophet." The final verses of Malachi close with the promise of God sending "*Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes*" (Malachi 4:5). "*The Prophet*" was the great prophet that Moses promised (Deuteronomy 18:15-20). John (the Baptist) denied being both. Jesus had an apparently greater view of John than John himself did and He would later identify John as the Elijah who was to come (Matthew 27:47 and Mark 15:35-36).

²² *So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* ²³ *He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."*

When John refused to accept any of the identities offered by the priests and Levites, they ask again, "*Who are you?*" John responds in the words of Isaiah 40:3 which announced deliverance to the Jews in Babylonian exile. In this context it refers to the people readying themselves for the coming Messiah.

²⁴ *(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)* ²⁵ *They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"* ²⁶ *John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,* ²⁷ *even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."*

After the priests and the Levites, others sent from the Pharisees (perhaps themselves Pharisees) asked John why he was baptizing if he was none of the aforementioned. The Jews were not unfamiliar with baptism. Baptism was used as a step in the conversion process of a Gentile to become a Jewish proselyte. The Pharisees were thus concerned why John was baptizing those who were already Jews. On whose authority is John doing this. Perhaps it would be appropriate in the eyes of the Pharisees for the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet to baptize existing Jews. But who is this fellow John and what right does he have baptizing Jews? John refers to his baptism by water, and thus reflecting an outward sign of cleansing. He acknowledges there is someone else who is already here, but the Pharisees do not yet know Him, that will supersede John. We now know the coming baptism will involve an inward cleaning.

²⁸ *These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

This appears to be a different village than the Bethany near Jerusalem where Lazarus lived.

Reflection and Action

John the Gospel writer seems to have gone out of his way to ensure there was absolutely no doubt that his readers were clear that John the Baptist was not the greater. Many have thus inferred that when John wrote his Gospel (under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit), followers of John the Baptist who thought John was superior to Christ must have persisted long after John's death and Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. It must have been significant enough of a threat to at least the Johannine community to require such a polemic. Remarkably, the worship of John the Baptist has persisted into the modern era (outside of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions). As an example, the Mandaeans are a monotheistic Gnostic religion practicing baptism (*manda* is the Aramaic equivalent of gnosis or knowledge). Mandaeans were mostly located in Iraq up until the aftermath of the Iraqi War in 2003. Mandaeans revere John the Baptist who they believe was a Mandaean himself and their greatest and final teacher.

John the Baptist was sent as a witness to Christ; a signpost if you will. Some people became attracted to the signpost rather than what the signpost was pointing to. While not the best analogy, there is a huge difference to the person who is hungry driving on the interstate between a McDonald's billboard and a McDonald's restaurant! Yet time and time again we see parallels in the church. Our church buildings, from lowly country churches to our great urban cathedrals, serve as pointers to Christ and reflect the majesty and glory of God. Yet how many times does a church building become an idol? On this Third Sunday of Advent typically associated with joy, as we look forward to celebrating the nativity and the first coming of Christ into the world, what is at the root of our joy? Could we be idolizing our Christmas traditions – signs typically associated with Christ's first coming – or the presence of Christ in the world?

John the Baptist said to those sent by the Pharisees, *"among you stands one you do not know"* (v.26). He was of course referring to Christ. Jesus stood among the Pharisees, yet they did not see him. As events unfurled in Jesus' ministry and He made His presence known, they still did not see Him for who He was (is and is to come). Perhaps there is a warning here for us in case we think we have everything figured out and narrowly define Christianity based on what a previous generation in history thought or what the current generation thinks. Christ has a history of upsetting the status quo. It would not be the first time He made the wise foolish and the foolish wise.

As the third Advent candle is lit this Sunday, we can see there is more light than darkness on our Advent wreaths. We can pause during this preparatory season and remember with joy Christ's arrival in the world and the light that He brought into it. As Christians, we recognize that we are not the light. Our job is to reflect the light of Christ. Even though 2023 has been a dark year, all the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of just one candle. How much more could Christ's light shine in the world if the church spent more time reflecting and less time blocking the light?



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