

John 1:6-8, 19-28
3rd Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

I am *not* the Christ. I am *not* the Anointed One. If there were no other reason to rejoice on this 4th Sunday of Advent, the Pink Sunday, the Sunday of Joy, that would be one. Thank God that your pastor is *not* the Anointed One whose job it is to redeem! Because if you didn't know it already, I'll let you in on what is not a secret at all. Your pastor can't even save himself. He is not perfect either.

But there is another reason to rejoice. *You are not* the Christ. *You are not* the Anointed One either. None of you are. If you somehow *think* you are, well, I have some time available to meet in my office, and perhaps refer you to some other professionals with whom you can talk.

There is another one. We heard about him in last week's Gospel reading. By our standards, reading and hearing the description of him, we might conclude that he is nuts. Standing out in the wilderness. Eating bugs. Gross! He is claiming that he is fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. And as crazy as he sounds and looks and behaves, even he admits that he is not the Christ.

Even though we might allow for someone in "Bible times" to mistakenly think of himself as the Messiah, we tend to regard anyone making that claim today as about the same as someone claiming to be Queen Elizabeth, Elvis Presley, or Donald Duck. This is a matter for medical or psychiatric attention, or even a case for law enforcement officials; it hardly seems worth wasting time talking about on a Sunday morning. Yet, if we *paraphrase* John's confession as "*I am not your way, truth, and life; I am not the one who will or even can save you.*" we begin to see how there may be a reason for some Advent reflection here, even on our part. If John, "**greatest of those born of women**" (Matthew 11:11), took such great care to make it clear that he was not the one who could save, perhaps we need to take a little more care.

Now most of us would never *claim* to be the Messiah. But how many are guilty at times of behaving as if they were God's gift to whatever group, claiming to be more than they are, tooting their own horns. There is a saying which supposedly comes from a Navy Investigator who looks into issues of "stolen valor." The saying varies depending on the source, but it goes along these lines. "There were 1,200 Navy SEALs in Vietnam, and I've met all 30,000 of them."

Most of *our* claims of prestige and honor aren't so bold and outlandish as issues of "stolen valor." But we're guilty of them. Guilty of making ourselves out to be more than we are. We'll admit we are not perfect, maybe even admit that we are sinners, but then cheapen that confession with something along the lines of "*but I try to be a good Christian*" "*But I try to do good in the world.*" "*But I try to [whatever noble deed you can think of.]*" And our excuses, our diluting of our confession doesn't pave the way for the Gospel, doesn't make straight the way of the Lord, but if not kept in check from a biblical perspective paves a road to an entirely warmer place.

Something even as simple as a family Christmas letter. So far, those I've seen *this year* are a lot more humble. But you can probably recall many in years past, perhaps even your own. "*Everything's great. Life is good. Look at all we've accomplished this year!*"

This self-centered foolishness even makes it way into the life of the church. Pastors are not immune. I have to guard myself. Pastors and parishioners alike can be guilty of wanting themselves to be the center of worship and praise. "*Look at what I've done for the church this past year, these past several years, these past 10, 15, 20 years.*" And while most wouldn't say it aloud or in so many words, their actions and attitudes show their thoughts of being "God's gift to the church."

Of course, the pendulum swings the other way too. When glory is on the menu, we elbow our way to the front of the line. But when punishment is on the agenda, things change. We step back. "*I wasn't there. It wasn't me. I wouldn't know anything about that. I was minding my own*

business.”

And then there's John. And were it not for the fact that the Baptist later was killed, you might even confuse him with John the evangelist because their personalities are so similar. The evangelist is ever hidden in his Gospel account, not mentioned by name, always pointing to Christ. And so was the life of John the Baptist.

“Who are you?” they asked. And what was John's response? I am NOT.

I am *not* the Christ. I am *not* [Elijah]. *No*, I am not [the Prophet.] In fact the only *affirmative* part of John's confession simply pointed to the Word (not even with the words “I am” though our English translations render it that way) simply **“I/Me? the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said,”** pointing back the Word of old, and then quickly pointing to the Word Made Flesh standing among them.

John's confession is that he himself is not, inviting all who heard and now read to look to the One who is, the One who is *the* I AM.

I am the bread of life. John 6:35

I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life. John 8:12

Before Abraham was, I am. John 8:58

I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. John 10:9

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. John 10:11

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. John 11:25

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. John 15:1

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. John 14:6

No one can say *these* things except Light to whom John the Baptist bore witness, no one except the Word Made Flesh. And why did He come into the flesh? Why the need to bring comfort to His people, to bring good news, to proclaim liberty, to grant, to give, to cloth and adorn? Because of all of the things we are not.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, today is the Sunday of the pink candle (and paraments and vestments if you have them), the Sunday of joy and rejoicing in the penitential Advent season. And the first thing necessary for us to be able to rejoice, is to remember what we are not. We are not righteous. We are not worthy. We are not model human beings. We are not 100% faithful to the Word, not even close. But we remember that, and then we remember *whose* we are.

John came baptizing with water for repentance and forgiveness of sins. He was not the Messiah, but He pointed to the One who *is*, the One with a greater baptism, One with the Holy Spirit. And Paul tells you and me that when we were baptized, we were united to the One who is, united with Him in His death and His resurrection.

“The true light,” (to whom John pointed) **“which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”** John 1:9-13

On this 3rd Sunday in Advent remember this: everything we are not is changed by the I AM. You are loved. You are redeemed. You are forgiven. You are children of God. And for that we are joyful, joyful in the penitential seasons, joyful in the dark days and times, and joyful into eternity as the Light of the world comes again in glory. Amen.