
John the Baptist and the Freedom of Humility

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
The Third Sunday of Advent – Year B**

It happens sometimes at a large church like ours that people confuse our clergy with one another. It happens quite often, in fact, that people mistake me for my colleague, Canon Holder. When Lauren preaches, *I* get compliments on the sermon! When her children are especially endearing or well-behaved in Children's Chapel or Sunday school, again, *I* get compliments! Of course, I think they're endearing and well-behaved *all* the time, which may be clue number one that I am not actually their mother.

So, I feel I should begin by clarifying that I am not Lauren Holder. If you've ever confused us, though, please don't feel bad! You're not alone! What's more, I love it! It's a compliment to be confused with her, or any of my colleagues. Sometimes, I don't even bother to correct the mistake. I just smile and say thank you. Sometimes, when I'm embarrassed by something I've done or said, I would *love* for you to mistake me for Lauren, or anyone else.

Indeed, there are plenty of days when I wish I could hide behind someone else's name or voice or face. There are many days when I wish for what I see in someone else's life or someone else's gifts. As a preacher, I'd love to be as insightful and articulate as Barbara Brown Taylor, or as funny as Anne Lamott. I'd love to have Michael Curry's fiery passion, or Richard Rohr's bottomless supply of content. But, alas, I don't, because I'm not any of them either. And I can't be, no matter how hard I try...

Even though I've always heard that *you can be whatever you want to be!* Even though it's a common maxim, in this country at least, that *you can do whatever you put your mind to! The sky's the limit!* Right?

Well, maybe not. At least, not according to today's Gospel. In this Gospel, the story of John the Baptist begins by telling us and the big-city priests and Levites asking about him who he is *not*. John is not the light. He's not the Messiah, not Elijah, not even a prophet. He is not the one to come, not the one everyone is waiting for. He's not even worthy to untie the thong of that one's sandals.

It's *after* John has made clear to them, and maybe also himself, who he's not, that he gets clear about who he *is* and what he is about: "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, 'make straight the way of the Lord!'" *After* John has put those other distracting titles and voices in their place, he finds his own, and uses it to prepare the way, he says, "for one who is among you, and who is coming after me, and who is greater than I."

It is a very brave way to begin, considering that John knows very little at this point about the details of what he's proclaiming. That's right. If we read on, we see that it's not until the *next* day that John sees Jesus, for the first time in this Gospel, and recognizes him as the "lamb of god"—in the same breath that he confesses, "I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

"I myself did not know him," John says again, "but I had a promise. I had a promise from the one who sent me: that the one on whom I see the spirit descend and remain is the one we've been waiting for, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit."

No, John doesn't have it all figured out. John never claims to be the one with all the answers. Jesus is still being revealed to him and the world. The way of the Lord is still being made straight, and John's own path is still unfolding.

But John knows enough to start: He knows he's not all-knowing. Not all-powerful. He is not the light, not the

savior, not God. And that helps him know who he is and what is his to do, today: to witness to the light that he does see. To tell the truth about what he does know; and to be honest about and ok with what he doesn't. To testify and preach and baptize, not as Jesus, but as John. Just John.

And most important: he knows the One who sent him. He trusts the One who sent him and the One who is coming. And his faithfulness to that One, and to the call he hears in this moment, prepare him to recognize Jesus when he comes, and to testify, "This is the Son of God."

John has this amazing ability to tune into the call of God, and the call of his own life, and to tune out all the noises that distract so many of us from our true selves and God-given vocations: competition and comparison; the desire for approval or security or control; the pressure of so many choices and voices and expectations about who we should be, how we should live, what we should prioritize, what gifts are worth having. Pressure, from without and within, to do what sometimes only God can do.

That pressure can be especially intense when we're faced with suffering or injustice. We so want to be able to provide answers, solutions, comfort, don't we? We so want to make it all better, on our watch. And we may convince ourselves that we can, or at least should be able to... if we just try harder, talk louder, learn better techniques, have more faith. But sometimes, we just can't. Sometimes, all we can do is stay present in the darkness, trusting trust that light will shine in the darkness and that the darkness will not overcome it.

It is humbling, to be sure. It is humbling to not be able to do all the good we want to, by ourselves. It's humbling to admit our limits—or to admit we have limits at all. It is humbling to give up the project of controlling the light or being the Savior or living lives that look and sound great but aren't ours.

But as John shows, it is also freeing. Humility is freeing! When you recognize that you can't be and do all things, and that you don't have to, you are freed and empowered to do the good you can do, to offer the gifts you do have to offer, to witness to the light you do see—that maybe no one else can see but you. That maybe no one would see without you. You are free to celebrate—not compete with, but *celebrate*—the light you see in others. You are free to show up as you are, and to allow others to do the same.

Accepting that God created you this way and not, and that God has called and gifted others, too, just may be the beginning of receiving and living into the one, unique, precious, beautiful life that God has given you—that no one else can live but you, and that the world needs.