

Lord of Advent, in you all that ever was and is and shall be is made for shining. We rejoice in the brightness of your rising against all the dark days and we give thanks for your coming in timelessness to capture time by love. Amen.

This morning let's look more closely at John the Baptist, or Baptizer as the newer translations have it.

I tried very hard to find a John the Baptist joke which are basically nonexistent. The best I could find is, What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common? Their middle name.

But I did find a joke about another another prophet, Mahatma Gandhi.

Now like many prophets, and probably J the B, (as he's known in the church biz) Gandhi never wore shoes.

He was always barefooted and so his feet were often dusty and were very tough, like leather.

The other thing about Gandhi was that he ate rice at every meal and as a consequence, sometimes his breath was, shall we say, memorable.

So you can probably sum up Gandhi as a

“Super-calloused fragile mystic, plagued with halitosis.”

Let's look at questions and answers this morning, specifically the questions that the priests and Levites asked John and the answers he gave them.

The encounter between the Jewish hierarchy and John is a fascinating one.

As we heard last week, John wore “camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.”

Having ridden on a camel recently, I can tell you that their wool is more like a Brillo pad, than the nice soft sheep's wool we're used to.

These clothes and food must have been unusual for that time or they would not have been mentioned here.

My 1st year in seminary, I was not attached to any particular church and so I took advantage of this freedom to visit different churches in town.

One of the churches was known for having a priest who was something of a character.

One Sunday in Advent, he preached on John the Baptist and appeared in the pulpit swathed in an enormous animal skin.

As he preached he took swipes from a honeycomb.

I have no memory of what he said but I certainly remember how he acted.

Now John, true to his calling as a prophet, was not your average citizen.

He looked strange. He ate odd food.

He did not fit in, but perhaps that is necessary if you are to be an effective prophet.
He had none of the status, the credentials,
that people at every time and in every society, often seek.
He operated alone, in the desert.
Now you'd think if you were a prophet and just setting up shop, so to speak,
that you would choose a central location,
in the midst of a populated area, Jerusalem, for instance.
But John, in the wayward and contrary way of all prophets,
chose to operate out of the desert, on the wrong side of the river Jordan,
away from people and away from authorities.
So when we're told that people flocked to hear him,
to repent and to be baptized, that catches our interest.
He must have been a very effective preacher.
He must have had a strong and powerful vision
for people to seek him out in the desert.
It would be like someone today, setting up a ministry on the eastern plains of CO,
in a small town, a good 2-hour drive from Denver.
It would have to be a pretty compelling message to get you to drive all that way.

Look at what happens in this story in John.
It says that the Jews sent priests and Levites out to him.
Now in many respects John was not all that different from a homeless person.
He had no possessions, no status, no money.
Would it be likely today that a group of important people,
like various bishops and maybe the governor's PR guy,
would travel to meet an itinerant preacher?
But John seems to have been special, someone who interested the authorities.
What was so interesting about John?
They knew he had the power to draw huge crowds
and that intrigued and ultimately concerned them.
What was it about John that made him such a magnet to so many people?
What was so powerful about John was that he told the truth.
He told people the truth about who they were
and offered them a way to repent and find forgiveness.
He offered them a way to find God.
He offered them a fresh start, a new beginning.
A way to wash away the past and to start over.

Now these authorities did not come to discredit John or to arrest him.
That would come later.

Oh no, they who knew the struggle for power better than most, they took his influence and his large following very seriously. They didn't scoff at him or call him names. Instead, they asked him questions. Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? These are serious people asking serious questions. They don't acknowledge John's power directly but only indirectly by the kinds of questions they ask.

Let's look at John's answers to their 3 questions. His answers are, "I am not the Messiah," "I am not Elijah" and "No." He is not tempted to take on the authority of such revered figures as the great prophets. In fact he is really not tempted to define himself other than what he is not. John is obviously not the least bit interested in titles. He doesn't say, "I am not the Messiah, but I am a prophet." "I am not Elijah but I do baptize. When questioned by others, we want to give ourselves some identity, some status. If we answer simply, "I am", it makes people nervous.

How would you answer the question, who are you? Maybe it's time for us to consider answering who we are not. What would it feel like to lay aside our roles, our titles, our credentials? Forget for a minute that you are a teacher or a lawyer or a retiree. Lay aside your degrees and your years of experience. Listen to the one thing John did say about himself, "I am the voice..." He knew who he was and what his greatest gift was – his voice, his words. "I am the voice..."

What is our essence? Who are we when, like a good steak, the fat around us is cut away and we lie there unprotected by titles and things? Identity has played a key role in the survival of humanity and I would expand the idea of identity to our group membership. For thousands of years, anyone who didn't belong to our group or look like us was considered a threat. That instinct to band together and to fight off others gave us a stronger chance of surviving to adulthood and producing our own offspring. There is a wonderful documentary, *Chimp Empire*, on Netflix,

where you see this dynamic in action.

But the tribalism that was so key to our survival has become a problematic relic and you have only to look around the world, most notably in the Near East today, to see how toxic identity and tribalism can be.

Labels are meaningless.

Titles good only as long as the organization lasts.

Maybe Advent lends itself to a stripping away, a season of non-attachment.

No, you don't have to give up the PhD after your name

or your nice new business cards with VP for Management on them.

Just set them aside mentally.

Allow this season to be a time to imagine, to know, who you are not.

That opens up the way to see who you most truly are.

I am loved by God, not for my titles or my money,

but because, as a human being, I am worth being loved.

I was worth the extravagance of creation.

I was worth God himself becoming human and sharing our existence.

I am a child of God.

I am God's joy and delight.