

Third Sunday in Advent (b)
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
December 13, 2020 (Online Only)

It's natural for us to play ourselves up in front of other people, to present ourselves in the best possible light. When you're interviewing for a job, for example, you're not going to say, "I cannot communicate with other human beings before 11:00 in the morning." You're not going to tell them you tend to doze off at 2:00 p.m., no matter where you are.

I remember when I finally realized I was going to be a pastor. I was a graduate student in Chicago. One night, everything became clear to me. But I wasn't sure where I should go to school. Should I stay at the University of Chicago, or should I apply at a specifically Lutheran seminary somewhere? The next day, I found out there was a Lutheran seminary right there in the neighborhood. So after I did my usual lap swim at the college pool, I walked over to the seminary on this warm spring afternoon, and as was my custom after swimming that spring, I didn't get dressed. I was just wearing my wet swimsuit and shower shoes, a bath-towel around my neck. I told the secretary I needed a school brochure. All I wanted was basic information. Within five minutes, I was sitting in the office of the Dean of Admissions, who interviewed me for a half hour, asking me about my history and my qualifications. And the whole time, I'm thinking: this guy has to think there's something wrong with me. I'm holding a bath towel like it's a security blanket. When I got up, I had to apologize for getting his seat wet. Not the image I want to project with people. I wasn't sure how all this was going to pan out.

You want to present yourself in the best possible terms, don't you? I mean, how are you going to get a job, be part of a club, get anybody's business, if you don't build yourself up to some extent? In the real world, you have to advertise yourself, display your credentials.

So what always strikes me about today's gospel is how John the Baptist—one of the great models of all time for Christians—(he's certainly one of my personal heroes)—breaks all the rules of a good interview. The pharisees—the bigwigs, the interviewers—have come to check him out. "What authority do you claim," they ask him, "to baptize people out here in the desert, to preach to people, to tell them how they should live their lives, to claim you speak the Word of God? How did *you* come to believe this is your job?" They're there to pronounce him in or out, whether he is worthy to listen to, whether he's credible, or not.

And you see what John does...he refuses to make any case for himself. Are you the Messiah? No. Are you Elijah, come back to us? No comment. Are you the prophet we've been expecting? Silence. Well who are you? Why wouldn't John make a case for himself. "Listen, here are my achievements. Here are my goals. I'm an upstanding member of this community. People respect me. They listen to me. I'm a good preacher, I try to be as good a person as I can. I know God's law and I try to follow it, and so forth. You'd expect John to present his resume.

But instead, John gives us NOTHING about himself. He says "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness." He is a voice. He is a message. The word he speaks, stands on its own merit. It doesn't matter who he is, what his history has been, what his credentials are. For John, who *he* is depends completely on the one he's witnessing to. John is our model for Christian proclamation. We point away from ourselves, towards the One who is coming. John, himself, has no claim to legitimacy. He's saying, the only thing he can hold up in his own defense, is Jesus.

John's example cuts to the heart of our everyday lives as Christians. Who, or what, are we pointing to, lifting up every day? What, or Whose image are we reflecting out to the world every day? What's our starting point every day? On what foundation are we building our lives? Is it faith in who God is, or is it faith in who we are? Do we start with ourselves, like a

clay statue that we're always trying to mold so that we can look strong and good to ourselves and others? Here, I'm going to erase that mistake so no one sees it. I'm going to make myself look strong over here. Just like people do in job interviews, I'm going to put a spin on my weaknesses and make you think they are actually strengths. Sure, I should probably admit that I have a few imperfections. But I'll only admit the weaknesses I want you to see. So you think I'm humble.

If we start with our own image like that on a daily basis, it doesn't matter what we try to cover up. The reality is, we're witnessing to ourselves first. We're trying to project an image of that clay figure self we want people to see; the image we're working on, shaping, manipulating, controlling for other people's consumption. We totally see it happening right now, gangbusters, in our public life, where we're so polarized, politically. There's nothing in the middle of our culture that unites us, there's no one truth that we're all willing to bow down to. So what do we end up with? Everyone presenting their own personal truths which they've shaped and molded and manipulated for popular consumption. And then we vote on the clay figure we like best.

During the season of Advent, we're not only preparing ourselves to celebrate God's intervention into this world with the birth of Jesus; we're also remembering that through Jesus, a final judgment is going to happen over all things, and that the One who was crucified for our sake is going to be the judge. And one thing is clear in all our advent readings: if we've been spending all our energy building ourselves up, our lives **will** depend on that resume we're trying to write for ourselves. We **will** receive our final reward, based on that clay figure of ourselves we tried to shape. We **will** be judged by our own personal records. And all our blemishes, weaknesses and failings will be revealed, no matter how much we try to cover them over. If we start with ourselves, if life revolves around us and that clay image of ourselves we're always trying to sell—then in the end we'll be left standing in front of God holding that little idol that we have made with our own hands. Now before then, we might end up getting a good job; we might gain membership in a nice club. And those are fine things in this life. But in

front of God, the clay image of myself I'm trying to sell myself to other people is a lump of lifeless dirt.

As Christians, we begin each day from a new starting point. First we make a humiliating admission. Like John the Baptist, we say "on my own, I am nothing. My personal resume in front of God is blank. I have no purpose but the one he gives me. I have no identity but the one he has marked me with." If I'm going to be something more than a pile of dirt, it'll only be because God has chosen to make a new human being out of a pile of dirt.

It's a hard thing to hear before Christmas. I'm a pile of dirt in front of God. I am a lifeless piece of clay. But that's exactly the truth I need to hear to be ready for Christmas...ready to receive again the amazing gift that God has given me. **The gift of his only Son**, who was born into this world to breathe his Spirit into the dead clay, and make us new people in his own image. His own sons and daughters. We cannot get that with anything on our personal resumes. We can only trust what he tells us, and receive that new life as a gift.

Every day, we find ourselves somewhere between the security of faith, and insecurity based on our job performance. We like to think we trust in God's promises, but in the back of our minds, we always keep our resumes ready. And in the middle of our insecurity, what can we do but hear God assuring us once again: you are my child. I've wiped away all your sins. I adore you, and in my eyes you are perfect." On the cross, God tore up our resumes forever. He looks at you and sees the goodness of Jesus. He looks at our sins—all that stuff we'll never put on our resumes—and all he sees is the wounds of Jesus. And that's enough for him. We are his sons and daughters. Our resume didn't get us to today. God's love got us here. And he will provide us with all the life we need, today and forever.

The gospel sets us free. Free to let go of ourselves, free to throw away the resume, free to throw away the idols we cling to, and trust ourselves completely to the grace and the providence of God. Like John, we can prepare the way for God as he comes into the world in Jesus Christ. We can see past the clay idols that people hide behind, and tell them the good news about what God has done for them. And you can count on it, they'll look at us, and they'll wonder, where is this person's courage, confidence, love and generosity coming from? And like John, you and I can point away from ourselves, to the one gives it all.