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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 17, 2023

Year B, 3 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)

[John 1:6-8,19-28](#)

[Psalm 126](#)

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Back in 2011 the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It features a 30-foot-tall statue of Dr. King striding forward and seeming to emerge from a block of granite. But not long after it opened, there was a problem. The quote that had been engraved on one side of the statue was an abbreviation of something Dr. King had actually said. It came from one of his final sermons, a famous one known as the “Drum Major Instinct” sermon.

In the sermon Dr. King pointed out that everyone has an instinct to be great, to achieve something, like a drum major leading the band. And when two disciples came to Jesus asking him to give them places of honor in his kingdom, what Jesus said to them wasn't, “How dare you want to be great?” He didn't say, “That's selfish and wrong of you. Being great is wrong, being ambitious is bad.” Rather he said, “Yes, there *is* a way to be great.” But as Dr. King points out, he gave a new definition of greatness. Not to seek greatness by dominating like Caesar. And not to give up on greatness by a kind of false modesty or glorification of suffering. But, he says, “Whoever wishes to be great must be a servant.”

Dr. King finished the sermon by reflecting on his own life and what he would want said about him at his own funeral—and in a heartbreaking scene, a recording of his words was actually played at his funeral only two months later. “Tell them not to talk too long,” he said, and not to focus on his Nobel Peace Prize or his education or any external accomplishments, but if they wanted to say something about him, they should say he tried to love others, to serve others, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. “If you want to say that I was a drum major,” he said, “Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.”

When they erected the statue in 2011, they took that quote and condensed it so that what appeared on the statue was “I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness.” Not “If you want to say I was a drum major,” but “I was a drum major.” It sounded like King was promoting himself, the exact opposite of what the sermon was trying to say in context. It was the poet Maya Angelou who first raised a backlash. She said the quote made him sound like an “arrogant twit.” And a year or two later, after a long bureaucratic process, the quote was removed.

I’m reminded of that story today as we encounter John the Baptist in our gospel reading. John is a drum major. A striking, attention-getting figure. Yet like Dr. King his message is not about himself. “He came as a witness,” the narrator tells us; “He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” And indeed when the people come to him to ask him who he is, he tells them instead who he isn’t. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not the prophet they are expecting.

It's only after three negative answers that he finally gives them a positive one. "I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."

John is here to prepare the way for another one, someone whose shoe he says he's not even worthy to tie.

Now John had an essential vocation. It wasn't to be Jesus; it was to be John. And there's a kind of paradox there, because it's exactly in that acceptance of his limits that John's true greatness is found. Imagine if John had wanted to claim the Messiah role for himself. He could have become yet another in a long string of attempted revolutionaries and ended up either crushed under the boot of Caesar or becoming a mini-Caesar himself, like so many others who have sought power over the long course of history. But imagine if John instead had sought comfort in a kind of false humility, thinking he was a nobody and what business did he have talking to anyone about God. His light would have been hidden under a basket and his crucial role in Jesus' story would never have been fulfilled.

"Who are you?" the people ask John. It is a good question for us to hear in this Advent, in this time of expectation, of self-examination, of listening for the still small voice of God. Who is each of us? Who am I? Who are you?

It's safe to say you are not the Messiah. It is not up to you to save the world, nor can you. Jesus has taken that burden from us. You are not the center of the universe. Nor am I. There might be times when we might wish to be, and rail against the fact that it is not about us. But that is also a great liberation.

But you are also somebody. There might be times when we might wish to be nobody, when we might want to deny the glory of God's image that shines brightly in each of us, whether through the messages of a society that tells some of us that we are indeed nobody or through our own internalized self-hatred or fear. But those messages are lies. Like John the Baptist you have a role to play in God's universe that only you can play. You were created to show forth God's glory in one unique way that no one else does or can.

I pray this Advent for each of us for deliverance from false grandiosity and from false humility; for the gift of knowing who we are not, and who we are; not God, but God's beloved children; not the Messiah, but his followers, his members, and his friends.