

Advent 3 (B)

Jn 1.6-8, 19-28

First, the bad news: John the Baptist got it wrong. It probably sounds scandalous for me to say that, but I think we have to admit an honest reading of our gospel lesson requires us to conclude that in at least one important respect John got it wrong.

Now the good news: John got it wrong in the best possible way. In fact, John's error is one we should emulate; we should all strive to be wrong in the way John is wrong. Even when he makes mistakes, John gives us a profound example of how to live the life of faith.

So what, exactly, does John get wrong? Was he wrong about who Jesus was? No, he was right about that, even though his encounter with Jesus forced him to rethink some things. John was wrong about himself. "Are you Elijah?" [they] asked him. 'I am not,' he said." But he was; he was Elijah. And the fact he refused to claim this identity for himself offers some important lessons for us.

The identity of John and the identity of Jesus and the relationship between them is an issue that crops up repeatedly in all four gospels: who exactly are these guys, and what do they have to do with one another? All four gospel writers demonstrate a concern for this question. There is, of course, Matthew's version of the baptism of Jesus, during which John initially refuses to baptize Jesus but relents when Jesus reassures him it's necessary (Mt 3.15).

There is, likewise, the story told by both Matthew and Luke about a conversation between Jesus and some of John's disciples. John's disciples ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And Jesus sends them back: "Go and tell John what you have seen ... [and tell him] blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (Mt 11.2-6; Lk 7.18-23).

And, of course, we have today's gospel. "Are you the messiah?" "No, I'm not." Later in this same gospel, some of John the Baptist's disciples complain to him that everyone has stopped coming to John and instead is going to Jesus. But John reminds them, "You yourselves heard me say, 'I am not the messiah,' but I have been sent ahead of him" (Jn 3.28).

This persistent concern about the relationship between John and Jesus suggests there was some confusion as to who the real messiah was: was it John, or was it Jesus? Even today, there are some—not many, but some—who believe John the Baptist was the messiah: there are maybe 50,000 or 60,000 Persian Gnostics known as the Mandaeanes who revere John much more highly than they do Jesus, and who believe Jesus stole and may have even twisted the teachings of John.

But the church has consistently confessed Jesus as the messiah. And because Christians have consistently said Jesus is the messiah, they have also consistently said John was indeed Elijah, and here's where we begin to get at how John got it wrong; here's where we begin to learn the lesson John has for us today.

We face two questions here. First, what does it mean to say John was Elijah? And second, what

evidence do we have that *justifies* our saying John was Elijah?

To answer the first of these questions, we have to turn to the book of the prophet Malachi, and there we find two important passages. In the first passage, God speaks to Israel through the mouth of the prophet and says (Mal 3.1-2), “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

In the second passage, a little later in Malachi (Mal 4.5), we hear this: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”

These passages from Malachi give us a sense of the expectations of those in first-century Israel who were waiting for the revelation of God’s messiah: before the messiah appeared, there would be a forerunner, a herald, a prophet like Elijah, strong in the Lord, who would prepare the way and make ready the people of Israel for the judgment that would follow.

So now we come to our second question: what evidence do we have that justifies our saying John was indeed this prophet, that John was Elijah? Well, we have quite a bit. We have a story in Luke’s gospel in which the angel Gabriel tells John’s father, Zechariah, “Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John. ... With the power and the spirit of Elijah he will go before [the Lord]” (Lk 1.13-17).

We have another story in Matthew’s gospel in which Jesus himself says this about John: “[He] is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you’ ... and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah” (Mt 11.10-14). Doesn’t get much clearer than that.

And we have still another story in Mark in which the disciples of Jesus ask him, “Why do the scribes say Elijah must come first?” And Jesus responds, “Elijah is indeed coming ... [and] has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased” (Mk 9.11-13).

All of these stories draw on the imagery of the book of Malachi, and all of these stories clearly indicate that as far as the gospel writers are concerned, John was Elijah, the forerunner, the one sent to prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord and the judgment that would follow.

But when he was asked directly, “Are you Elijah?” John says, “I am not.” What are we to make of this? There are two lessons here, and they’re both lessons we need to learn in order to enter more deeply into our life of faith.

First, we have a lesson here about faithfulness: John inaugurated his ministry without knowing exactly what it was God was asking him to do or even who it was God was asking him to be. God called, and John responded; he was faithful to the call even though God didn’t give him a road map.

Why should we believe John didn’t know exactly what it was God was asking him to do or who it was God was calling him to be? Because John himself tells us so. In the passage that

immediately follows today's gospel lesson (Jn 1.29-34), John says to his disciples, "Look, there he is, the Lamb of God! I didn't know that was him, I wasn't sure when he would appear, I didn't quite know how all of this was going to play out, but now God has shown me that's the guy, right there!"

John had stepped out in faith—and he hadn't just stepped out in a little way, but in a rather big way. He based everything he had on the sense that God was asking him to do something, but until God did it even John wasn't sure what exactly was going on. He was faithful to an extraordinary degree. That's our first lesson.

The second lesson we have from John has to do with his absolute determination to make sure people were focused on his message and not on him. If he had claimed to be the forerunner, he would have been someone rather special, wouldn't he? Imagine if he had said to the priests and Levites, "Yes, I am Elijah, I am the Lord's appointed messenger, I'm the one on an inside track with God!" That probably wouldn't have gone over very well, and the message would have gotten lost. In fact, that's probably exactly what the priests and Levites who questioned John were expecting; that's what they were *hoping* would happen.

But John evades the trap; he overcomes the temptation to make himself more important than his message. *He* wasn't the point; the baptism he offered wasn't the point. The point was the one who would come *after* him, and John was absolutely determined to make sure the one who would follow him was the focus. Later in this same gospel, when some of John's disciples complain to him that everyone had stopped coming to him and instead was going to Jesus, John reminds them, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3.30).

John gives us an example of utter faithfulness, of what it looks like to respond in obedience even when we're not sure where God is calling us to go. And John gives us an example of what it looks like to make sure the focus of our lives is not ourselves, but the one to whom we are called to testify.

So now you're thinking, "Well, that's all very nice for John, but that doesn't really pertain to me. I haven't been called by God to be a prophet." Yes, you have. You've been baptized, right? Every single person in this room who has been washed in the waters of baptism is called to a ministry of witness and proclamation.

Every single person in this room who partakes of the grace of the Eucharist is sent out sustained by the Body and Blood of the Lord to carry his life to the world and to cry out in the wilderness of this world, "Make straight the way of the Lord, because your God is coming to save you." Can you see yourself as someone who is called to a ministry of proclamation? You are.

"But I'm not *sure*," you say, "I'm not entirely sure of what it is God is calling me to do." Neither did John. He was given a word, and he went. He went not knowing how his message would be fulfilled, not knowing the one whose coming he preached so fervently, not even knowing who he himself was. He didn't know, but he went, and as he went he preached one thing and one thing only: never himself, but only the one who would come after him.

The ministry of John the Baptist is an invitation. It's an invitation to prepare for the coming of the one John proclaimed. But it's also an invitation to take our place alongside John and share in his ministry of proclamation. It's an invitation to listen carefully to where God is calling us to go, and then *to go*, maybe without even knowing how it's going to play out or where we're going to end up or even who God is calling us to be.

And just as there's an invitation here, there is also a promise. John's life testifies to the faithfulness of the one who appointed him to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. The promise of John's life is that when we proclaim the message God gives us to proclaim—a message that is nothing other than Christ himself—when we proclaim that message, we will see him. Like John, we will be able to say, “There he is! I wasn't sure that was him, I wasn't expecting to see him here, but there he is! The Lamb of God! Rejoice, O peoples, for the Lord your God has come to you and has set you free!”

So hear the call. Respond in faith, and with our brother John testify with full assurance, not to yourself, but to the one who comes bearing the gift of eternal life, the one who gives the Spirit without measure (Jn 3.34), the one who meets us this day in the scriptures, in the breaking of the bread, and in the fellowship of his body, the Word incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC