

## **An Honest Admission**

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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### **The Third Sunday in Advent**

Something big was apparently happening and the ripple effects could be felt all the way to Jerusalem. What was happening was not taking place in Jerusalem, the seat of power in the region and certainly, the holy city for the religion of the day. So it must have been quite something if it got the attention of, and riled up the religious police enough for them to make their way out to the wilderness and find out what in the world was going on. And there they discovered John.

Each year during Advent we encounter John the Baptist—the wilderness prophet wearing camel’s hair and eating bugs, albeit with honey. I can’t close my eyes and picture the Apostle Paul, for example. I can’t picture in my mind what Peter or Mary looked like. But for some reason, I can close my eyes and picture John the Baptist, all wild and unkempt, angry and prophetic to the point of questioning his emotional stability.

From his wilderness pulpit John proclaimed a hard-hitting message that people had better get their act together. They needed to get right with God. That it was high time they make their crooked paths straight and repent of all their sins. And then he offered them baptism in the Jordan River as a sign of being washed clean and made new.

A particular favorite target of John’s scorn and wrath was Herod, the propped up corrupt king. A phony king in an occupied land, who also happened to be in collusion with the religion of the day—what could possibly be wrong with that scenario?

And yet as stern as John’s message was, people flocked out to the desert to hear it. And I sometimes wonder if they found themselves drawn to it because he seemed to be speaking a hard truth in troubled times. John was speaking truth during a time when no one knew what could be believed anymore. And word about it, about this unauthorized and unorthodox preacher, administering baptism while not holding back in his attacks on Herod for having an affair with his brother’s wife—word about it and about the crowds flocking out there to be a part of it made its way to the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

So one day they sent some agents out to the wilderness to get some answers. They basically wanted to know who John is and what he was up to. What’s his agenda? But the fact that the religious authorities in Jerusalem were threatened by John says, perhaps, more about them than it does John. People who try to control and repress others, and who collude with the government to do it, are so

easily threatened because they know their unholy alliance is corrupt. And they know in their heart of hearts that it's ultimately not sustainable.

So these Levites and priests ask John, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, responding honestly, "I am not the Messiah." And how refreshing is that? There's no Messiah Complex here. No inflated sense of his own importance. Instead, he points to the future as if to say, it's not about me. It's about the one coming after me, the one so great I am not worthy to untie his sandals. It's an honest admission when it would have been so easy to go the other way.

John knew he was attracting a following. He knew that religious people love to put their leaders on pedestals, and that frankly, most religious leaders love being placed on them. They leverage their position and elevated standing to cultivate almost cult-like followings. There are simply too many nauseating examples of that to start naming them. But John could have easily gone down that road. But he didn't.

"I am not the Messiah."

What then? Are you Elijah?

"I am not."

Are you a prophet?

"No."

Who are you?

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness..."

And it was perhaps in that admission as well, that all of the countless others who felt like lone voices crying out in wildernesses of their own, found someone who spoke to them. Who spoke for them. Who heard in his lone voice what their inner still small voices had been trying to articulate for a long time. Drawn to John in the wilderness were those for whom, and for whatever reason, found themselves looking out into the apparent void, feeling lost, confused, overwhelmed and hopeless. And they were drawn to him.

I'm not Elijah.

I'm not even a prophet,

and I am certainly not the Messiah.

And implicit in his admission that he is not the Messiah, the Savior, is also a confession, that he needs a savior. It's a plea that the world needs a savior. That when left to our own devices, when left to think that we have all the answers or that we are the center of our world, things become broken because we are broken. Things become corrupt and so off balance and out of whack to the point where something profound needs to happen. We are not capable of saving ourselves.

We are not capable of righting our ship unless we do so from deeply held moral convictions based on things like fairness and compassion and justice—namely the things our faith teaches us—values that are universally accepted. John was right. Get your house in order and get right with God.

And this, to me, is the great irony in all of it. Clashing with the crass commercialization of this season and its emphasis on gifts and stuff and spending lots of money, is the real message of this season that is, quite frankly, about poverty. It's about a poverty of spirit that acknowledges human brokenness. It's about the vulnerability and honesty of acknowledging ones weaknesses, shortcomings and therefore need of a savior.

That, despite all of the ways we want to be self-sufficient and believe that we are, we need a savior. We need the strength and the hope that comes from the assurance of knowing that we are loved children of God. And so we need to embrace the one who embraced us in the person of Jesus the Christ. We need to draw closer to the one who drew close to us. We need to cultivate in our own lives that deep sense of love and grace he extended time and time again. We need to live by the values that guided him and caused him to treat people the way he did, especially the poor and the vulnerable in our midst. We need to live for others and not solely for ourselves.

The good news, what we celebrate this time of year is that into a broken and hurting and needy world came a savior—one in whose light we could see light, in whose truth we could discover freedom, and in whose will for our lives we can discover peace.

Christ came into the world offering peace on earth, but also peace in your life and in whatever part of you is unsettled and anxious or afraid. At this time of year, you are invited to acknowledge your dependence on God and your need for a savior. And you are invited to make room in your hearts to receive him anew.

Amen.