

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## A MAN SENT BY GOD

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Who are you?”

That is the question we naturally ask whenever we come up against an individual who is unusual or has something challenging to say. What are your credentials? By what authority do you say these things? Who do you think you are? St. John the Evangelist makes it obvious that the Jewish authorities needed an answer to these questions so that they could determine how to deal with John the Baptist's proclamation, as well as with the man himself. But since the gospel was not written for the Jewish authorities, but for St. John's community and those who would follow Jesus, the underlying message is also that members of the community were also curious about how the Baptizer fit into the story of Jesus. For those of Jewish background in both communities, the question took on even greater importance because of the promise repeated every Passover that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah. In addition, it was believed that the Messiah would appear in advance of God's consummation of the kingdom of Israel. So those three words, “Who are you?” carry an unbelievable weight of holy expectation and fear.

Perhaps that is the explanation for why we are given more information about who the Baptist is not than who he is. First, we read that he is not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet. Then we are told that John the Baptist does not baptize with the Holy Spirit, but only with water. Finally, he claims that he is not even of a stature to be worthy to attend to the most menial needs of the One who is to come. No wonder the Jewish leaders ask a second time, “Who are you?”

So, who is John the Baptist? He is the “Preparer.” John prepares the world ritually by offering a water-washing so that they might appear ceremonially clean for the arrival of this most important One. He also prepares them by telling them what they can expect when this One arrives. By quoting from Isaiah 40 (v3), the Baptizer communicates to believing Jews that this One is God, because the listeners would know that the quoted passage continues with, “*Here is your God! See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward and recompense before him*” (Isaiah 40:9-10).

It is clear from St. John's gospel and the words of John the Baptist that the Baptizer was more interested in Jesus than himself. He pointed to the One who was to come – He was a man sent by God.

When I think of a man going before an important person to prepare the way, I cannot help remembering the experience I had in Jerusalem back in 1997. We took our trip in the Spring and were in Jerusalem during the observance of Eastern Orthodox Holy Week and Easter. As the Patriarchs from various traditions visited the Holy City, there were daily processions as they went from sacred place to sacred place. Each of these processions was preceded by a man with a large staff with which he struck the pavement and cried out, “Make way for His Holiness

Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, Patriarch of Antioch and the Supreme Head of the Syriac Orthodox Church!” By so doing the man in front cleared the path for the Patriarch and announced to everyone within two blocks who was coming.

Although we have vergers who lead formal ceremonial processions in the church, they have become just a vestige of the “one who goes before.” Somehow that seems appropriate for an institution who has forgotten that its role is to announce and demonstrate the return of Jesus so that the people might be prepared for his arrival. Such an announcement is a warning to those who hear. Such a warning is a kind of mercy. The announcement keeps the innocent from being harmed and gives notice to the disobedient to reform. In addition, it removes the element of surprise. There is then no excuse for being caught unaware.

John the Baptist came so that the people would see the Light – that is, that they would know the Truth and believe in the One who was to come. For this purpose, John was a man sent by God. He came in the mercy of God to announce the first Advent of Jesus. Likewise, the Church exists as God’s mercy to announce Jesus’ return.

If we have the same role, what can the Church learn from John the Baptist?

John was not remembered for being born into a priestly family or being related to Jesus through their mothers. John is remembered because he was the “Announcer.” John’s whole life was informed by his call. He dressed, he acted, he ate and he spoke the way he did because he was the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare for the Lord. Therefore, he lived differently from the world. He always pointed away from himself and to the object of his announcement. He proclaimed the message without hesitation or nuance. He also acknowledged those who believed by baptizing them for a relationship with the Lord.

As a church, we will not be remembered for our buildings, programs, denominational alliances, liturgies or even our doctrinal orthodoxy. What we will be remembered for is our functional obedience to our Lord and his call upon us.

Did we announce and demonstrate the source of Truth – or did we promote ourselves?

Did we encourage and welcome people who did not know Christ into an eternal relationship with him – or did we simply pray that they would join our church?

Did we give up our identity as the “elect” in order to live in the wilderness where the lost could find us – or did we settle for living in the Temple and spending a fraction of our temple tax on missions?

If we are to be a people sent by God, then our lives will look more like John’s than those of the Pharisees.

We will tutor and mentor kids on Church Hill.

We will sponsor and chaperone Youth missions and events.

We will participate in mission trips.

We will serve our neighbors by participating in work days – like the ramp-builds.

We will look for ways to have neighborhood Bible Studies.

We will bring friends, neighbors and colleagues to church events.

We will train our children in the ways of God by word and deed, rather than have our lives molded to their schedules and desires.

To be a people sent by God is a high calling – the highest – and it comes with great responsibility.

On the world's calendar New Years is coming and the time for making resolutions is fast approaching. On the Church calendar we are already in the New Year – won't you join me in resolving to become the people we have been called to be? Resolve with me to join the brotherhood of the Baptizer – the brotherhood of the sent – by becoming intentionally active in the work of the kingdom in the world.

Let us pray.

*Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (BCP, p. 832)*

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on December 11, 2011, the Third Sunday of Advent, Year B.*