

Title: Identity, Mission, and Vision**Text: John 1:6-8**

**A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, December 14, 2008 (Third Sunday in Advent)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. If you haven't been raised in a more liturgical church, you may not understand what Advent is all about. It is the season of waiting for the good news which Christmas brings.

Most of us aren't used to waiting. We want what we want when we want it, and unless we are patient about waiting and preparing ourselves for that which is to come, we may actually miss it because we were too busy doing something else.

Last week Don told us the story of baptizing Kara Mendenhall, the daughter of Hollie and Darin Mendenhall. There was a story behind that story that he didn't tell. Darin's father had flown all the way from Florida, for the baptism. Just before the service, Kara became fussy as children are prone to be. As fate would have it, the Mendenhall's had left the diaper bag in the car, so Darin's dad volunteered to go out to the car and retrieve the bag. While he was gone, Don called the Mendenhall's forward for the baptism, and Darin's dad missed the whole thing.

Luckily, our 9:16 service is flexible enough that Don was able to stop everything. He called Kara's grandfather forward, told everyone what had happened and let Kara have a special moment of blessing with her grandfather. Then he talked about it being a symbol of Advent; that we are waiting for something special and we don't want to get distracted or we may miss the very thing we have been waiting for.

So Advent is about getting ourselves ready for the good news of Jesus Christ. Many of you have asked why we don't sing Christmas carols, and I have told you that we

are waiting for Christmas. We are preparing to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. We know it is coming, but it is not here yet, and so we wait. We light candles, sing advent hymns, and we wait.

Last week Don gave us some insight on the story of John the Baptist in Mark's gospel. This week we turn to the same story told by a different writer; the story of John the Baptist in the gospel according to John.

The Nativity story is so familiar to us that we may forget some of the details about John. He was a second cousin of Jesus; the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. Elizabeth was pregnant with John when Mary visited their home after receiving the news that she was pregnant with Jesus. (Luke 1:39-79). In that story it says that baby John leapt in the womb of Elizabeth when she was in the presence of Mary honoring the baby Jesus whom she was carrying in her womb.

Now there is a feeling the men in our congregation will never have. We can feel a baby kicking in the womb when we are invited to do so, but we can never know the joy of feeling a baby leap inside of us. That is reserved for women only.

Later in his life, when Jesus comes to John to be baptized, John says he is not worthy to do it; that it is he who should be baptized by Jesus. Seventy years after John baptized Jesus; there must have been a group in the first century church who claimed that the true believers were those who followed John in their search for Jesus. The role which John the Baptist played in the life of the early church is not clear, but what is clear is that the writer of John's gospel wants to be sure that those who read it understand that John is not the Christ. His role was to prepare the way for the coming of Christ by announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

There are three words I would like to focus on this morning which define John the Baptist in the Gospel of John: Identity, Mission, and Vision. Let's take some time with each of those words.

IDENTITY

The author of John's gospel gives us the identity of John the Baptist. *There was a man sent from God whose name was John.* There is something in that identity which is important for John, the writer of the Gospel, and we must assume that there was something which is important about that identity for John the Baptist himself. It is an identity which every faithful believer is given, but unfortunately few of us own.

At the very beginning of the bible, in the Book of Genesis, we are taught that we are created in the image of God and in the likeness of God. In the middle of the bible, the Psalmist asks the question in Psalm 8, *"What are human beings that you are mindful of them and mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor"* (Psalm 8: 4-5). Jesus said to his followers, *"You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends."* Toward the end of the Bible Paul says *"When we cry Abba, Father! It is the spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are the children of God and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ"* (Romans 8:15-17). If we are followers of Jesus Christ, then we share the same identity as John the Baptist. We are men and women sent by God with a purpose.

Did you know what you are called and what you call yourself makes a difference in how you feel about yourself? When children hear, *"Come here, stupid,"* they tend to

think of themselves as stupid. When children hear they are not quite as pretty or handsome as their brother or sister, they tend to think of themselves as unattractive. If you have been called “lazy” and “no good” for too long, “lazy” and “no good” is what you tend to become.

When I was in the 7th grade, I had an art teacher who believed that there was a right way and a wrong way to appreciate art and to be artistic, and to this day, every time I am faced with a blank piece of paper and asked to draw something, I freeze. According to my teacher, my way of appreciating art was the wrong way.

We tend to take on the identity of what we are called. John the Apostle calls John the Baptist a man sent from God, and it shaped his identity as one who was sent for a purpose.

MISSION

The word that is used to define John the Baptist’s purpose or his mission in life is the Greek word *marturia*. It is the same root of the word *martyr*. It means *witness*. A witness is one who is willing to sacrifice his life to bear witness to a truth she has inside.

This is the mission John claims in his life. He proclaimed that a new kingdom was coming. He proclaimed that the rule of God was about to unseat the powerful of his time, and for this he paid the ultimate price. His head was handed to Herod’s daughter on a platter. He was a witness to the Kingdom of God breaking in on the world as it was known in 33 A.D. He paved the way for Jesus. He was not the main event. He was a witness to who Jesus was and what the entrance of Jesus into the world might mean.

Can you think of someone in your life who has paved the way for you so that you might know the love of God in Jesus Christ? Is there someone who, when you were

around them, was a compelling witness about the love of God that you wanted to be just like them? Believing there is nothing so powerful as a personal witness, may I take a moment of personal privilege and tell you my story?

A few weeks ago the Reflections editorial team asked if I would write something for the winter edition of that publication, and I found myself thinking again of Louis H. Evans, Jr. who was a John the Baptist for me.

During my freshman year in college, I had become involved in the La Jolla Presbyterian Church outside of San Diego. I had been invited to church by a very attractive young woman, and my motives for being there were not entirely pure. However, her invitation came at a crucial moment in my life when I needed someone to talk with. It was because Lou Evans was willing to give me time to talk about my young adult confusion that I continued to go to church.

As a family, my family was on again, off again when it came to church attendance. I never sensed from my parents that faith was a high priority in their lives. However, they did teach us some strong values, and it was those values which were causing me my confusion.

There was a trilogy of values that they had taught me which were important: Always be honest, work hard, and never give up on family. Now my parents were divorcing. One of the legs that held my three-legged stool together was crumbling. Suddenly they were giving up on family, and life became very confusing.

Lou Evans listened to me share the pain of losing the stability of my family. It was my freshman year in college, and the combination of my family disintegrating and the challenge of college level work had dealt me a one-two punch. I was in danger of

flunking out of school by the mid term, and I went to Lou after a Wednesday night class which he taught for those of us who had not grown up in the church.

After the class, we went to his home. Like a good father, he helped me lay out a schedule that included class time, study time, work time and church time. He helped me to see that I could do it if I would apply myself, but perhaps even more than that, he believed in me.

At the close of our time together that evening, Lou seized the moment. He said, *“Randy, I know I have become important in your life, but I am concerned that some day I am going to let you down. I would like you to know that God’s love will never let you down, and I would like you to know the person who has shown us this love: Jesus Christ. If you would be willing, I would like to have you invite him into your life right now so that you will always know how much God loves you.”*

Lou said a prayer for me and I repeated the words of that prayer, like an echo, as Janet Ressler would say. When I got out to my own car, before I put the key in the ignition, I said my own prayer: *“Lord, I don’t know what that man has, but I want it.”* That was the day when I became a follower of Jesus. There was no bolt of lightning. There was nothing written in the heavens. It was simply that when I went to church on Sunday, the sermon meant something to me that it had never meant before, and the next week when I went to the class, it made sense to me in a way it had not made sense before. That was the day that my journey of faith, which began at my baptism at age 15 began to take a shape that it had never taken before, and it continues to this day.

Lou Evans was my John the Baptist. He prepared the way for me to receive, on my own, the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. He witnessed the truth he knew. This

is the function of a John the Baptist. Have you been able to identify who your John the Baptist is? Someone who pointed the way to Jesus for you? A family member? A friend? A Sunday School teacher? A youth group leader? A colleague? Have you thanked them for the role that they played in your life?

VISION

The mission of John the Baptist was to bear witness to someone greater than himself. He knew he was not the vision that God had for humankind. The vision of the Messiah was of someone greater than himself; someone so much greater than him that he said he was not even worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. John had a vision that true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was not that light. He was to bear witness to that light.

St. Augustine has captured this truth in one of his commentaries. He wrote, *“God became a man for this purpose: since you, a human being, could not reach God, but you can reach humans, you might now reach God through a man. And so, the man Christ Jesus became the mediator of God and human beings. God became a man so that following a man—something you are able to do—you might reach God, which was formerly impossible to you.”* [Source: St Augustine, Commentary on Psalm 134:5]

Conclusion

Identity, Mission and Vision: these are the gifts of John the Baptist to our preparation in this season of Advent. May you discover who you are, what you are called to do in life and have it shaped by the saving grace of God which we experience in Jesus Christ.