

Sermon – January 9, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
John 1:19-32

Today—which churches have historically called “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday—we heard a bit about “John the Baptizer” from the Gospel of John (no relation). It was written around the year 100, roughly 70 years after Jesus’ death (and John the Baptizer’s for that matter).

By that time—because of incomplete information, debate, and the fact that there wasn’t anything like long-distance *phone* lines or video conferencing software—*some* communities of faith had come to believe that John the *Baptizer* was the Messiah, *not* Jesus.

A counter-cultural prophet of the Jewish tradition, born of a miracle, preparing the way of the Lord in the world, who was eventually executed by the government because of his radical preaching and teaching.

Sound familiar?

If things had gone differently, it’s not impossible to imagine us *today* worshipping “John Christ” every Sunday, and celebrating Jesus the *Carpenter* one week a *year*.

There were a lot of people in *John’s* time who had some “ideas” about who he was:

Some thought he was the promised Messiah who would save them all, some thought he was Elijah who had never died but actually ascended to heaven in a tornado, and others thought he was the reincarnation of an influential prophet from the Hebrew Bible. And in the decades after his death, a lot of people had a lot of time to come up with labels and explanations and identities for John as his legend spread.

So in the face of all this misinformation, right off the bat in its very first chapter, the Gospel of John recounts John the Baptizer saying in his very own words in no uncertain terms: “I am not the Messiah.” I’m not even Elijah, or Moses, or Isaiah, come back from the annals of history to hold court. *I* am not worthy to untie the *sandals* of the Messiah.

Have you ever heard a rumor about yourself come circling back to you? For some of us, it happened at school—the ultimate gossip incubator—for some of us it happened in the workplace spreading among employees and bosses alike, and for some of us it happened among friends or even families.

A story or an impression about us gets passed from one person to another, until the game of Telephone snowballs it into something unrecognizable.

Maybe it makes us out to be bigger and better than we actually were, or—maybe more *often*—it makes us out to be *way* worse. You ever had that Steve Urkel moment of

“Did I do that?” *That* doesn’t sound like *me*. *I’m* nothing like *that*. *I* don’t remember it at *all* that way.

Given enough time, the *perceptions* others have of us—even those we know *well*—their labels for us, and in the end our whole *identity* in their *minds* can end up incredibly skewed, and when we finally *hear* about it it’s a *shock* how *inaccurate* it’s become. “That’s not who I am at *all*.”

Jesus shows us that no one else can tell us who we are but God... and John shows us that no one can tell us who we aren’t but ourselves.

I’ll say that more simply: ***We know who we are not... and God knows who we are.***

What we see very clearly in John, is someone who knows who he is *not*. “I am not the Messiah.... I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

In those days, disciples—followers of great teachers—were expected to perform servants’ work.

There wasn’t supposed to be anything elitist about being a Rabbi’s pupil; you didn’t just *learn* at their feet, you lived as their servant, because you were never *too good* to serve, even as the Rabbi served *you* by teaching. But even *disciples* weren’t supposed to untie the sandals of their masters, because *that* work was the *lowest* of the low, the *uncleanest* of the unclean. *Actual* servants, actual *slaves* did that, and even *disciples* weren’t expected to be *that* lowly.

What John the Baptizer was *pointing* us to when he said he wasn’t *even* worthy *enough* to untie the Messiah’s *sandals*, was someone that was so much *greater* than him, that not only was John not as important as everyone *thought* he was, he was comparatively *less* important than the lowliest slave.

To *terribly* misquote a favorite internet video of mine, John the Baptizer was teaching them the real pecking order: “It goes [me,] the dirt, the worms inside of the dirt, [the Messiah’s] stool, [Elijah,] *then* [the Messiah.]”

John *knew* what he was *not*, and wasn’t anybody gonna tell *him* what he *was*.

The same should be true for *us*. Some of us may not know who we *are* yet, and it may take us our entire lives and maybe more to truly figure it out, but we should all be able to *see* what we’re *not*. *Who* we are not.

And when someone thinks they *know* us, or thinks they can *define* us, or label us, or make assumptions about us, we should be able to feel at our core *when* they’re *wrong*.

If someone tells you you're the greatest thing since sliced bread, you should know better than anyone how much that *isn't* true. And if someone says you're stupid, or ignorant, or useless, you should be able to recognize all the ways you are *not*. If someone tells you, "You don't look like a man to me, so stay out of the men's restroom," hold your head up high, because no random *bystander* is the arbiter of what you *aren't*. And if someone tells you you *aren't* the victim of an injustice, then they haven't walked a mile in your shoes.

If we look deep inside us, step back and take a good hard look at ourselves—which can be *hard*, and can take serious, painful effort—we should be able to (like John) recognize when people are giving us *more* credit than we *deserve*, keep that false pride at bay, and strive to be better. And we should *also* be able to recognize when we are *better* than what the rumor mills and the gossip factories and the prejudices and bigotry and preconceptions are making us out to be.

No one can tell us who we *aren't* but *ourselves*... and no one else can tell us who we *are* better than God.

I'm reminded of a conversation Jesus had with his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. He asks them, "'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven.'"

It's a lot like our reading today. John himself, whose whole job it was to *prepare* people for the coming of the Messiah—didn't even know *Jesus* was the Messiah until the Spirit of God showed up and landed upon Jesus like a dove. In Matthew, which recounts Jesus' actual baptism at the hands of John, a voice from heaven announces, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

You may not know who you are yet, or you may find yourself doubting who you thought you were... but *God* knows you. *Others* may try to define you, but don't let what *they* say about you distract you from what the *Spirit* is trying to tell you.

My favorite quote from the TV show *Lost* is repeated multiple times throughout the series: "Don't tell me what I can't do!"

Only *you* can say who or what you *aren't*. And nobody but *God* should be telling you who you *are*. So push aside all the noise, all the misunderstandings, *and* all the malice... and listen to what Elijah called the "still small voice" of God. Listen for what it is about *you* that *God* is well pleased of. And like Jesus, like John, and everyone else who

called themselves God's disciples, take hold of that, nurture it, and let who you *are*, not who you are *not*... shine everywhere you go in everything you do.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.