

ONE WHOM YOU DO NOT KNOW

John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Focus Text

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

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This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Earlier this year, a highly-thoughtful person, new to our congregation, said to me that in all her years of worshipping in Protestant churches, she had never worshipped in a church in which the references to Jesus of Nazareth were more often expressed through the name "Christ" than the name "Jesus." And she asked why that was?

I had never been asked the question before, but I knew instinctively that her observation was accurate. I know, for instance, that in my own life, I am more comfortable referring to "Christ" than to "Jesus." I said to her:

I believe the reason we don't say "Jesus" as much as we say "Christ" is that Jesus of Nazareth was the human being in whom God became flesh.

Because in our theological tradition, we focus more on the sovereignty and mystery of God, references to "Jesus" often feel a little too familiar. They can even detract from the holiness of God.

By contrast, I said, the name "Christ" reminds us that Jesus is in fact God, the Holy One in our midst.

The answer seemed to satisfy the woman. (At least she continues to worship here!) But the conversation we had has come back to me this week in thinking about the season upon us and the passage before us.

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Over the next two weeks, many of us will go places, do things, and see people that put us deeply in touch with our humanity.

- We will remember those no longer with us – those who have passed away in the fullness of time, those taken from us by surprise, those taken tragically early.
- We will be especially close to people who have come into our lives this year: infants in the nursery we have prepared, children of those whom we have reared, new and deep friends, the person with whom we have fallen in love, the person with whom we have exchanged vows.
- We will be in the special presence of our worries and losses: the aging of our body, the tearing asunder of relationships, fear over job loss, retirement savings depleted, investments crushed.

During these next few weeks:

- We will remember and perhaps return to places where so many experiences have formed us: the family homestead, the church on whose basement we slept as a teenager, the elementary school whose smell has not changed in decades, the basketball court on which triumphs seemed so easy and so complete.
- We will be moved to give the man who approaches us at the Shell station \$20 to get to Fairfax hospital to see his dying mother rather than brush him off, however politely.

All this we will do at this time of year because the culture in which we live slows down for a few days and lets us do so, even as the culture creates new pressures and added demands. And we will do so because by birth or choice we have claimed for ourselves the name Christian, the name that links us to Jesus of Nazareth, to Jesus Christ, to the Holy One in our midst, the name given to the one whose birth we will welcome. Whether we call him “Jesus” or “Christ,” he is ours and we are his, “Emmanuel, God-with-us”; so as we remember him, we remember who we are.

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The passage before us reads: “A man sent from God, whose name was John, [comes] as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe [through the light].”

- We recognize this man as John the Baptist, the fiery wilderness preacher who calls people to repent, confronts them about their misdeeds and misadventures, baptizes them, prepares the way for Jesus Christ, and even baptizes Jesus.
- We know him as John the Baptist because that is the way Matthew and Mark and Luke describe him, and that is the name they give him.¹
- But in the Gospel of John, this man is not called “the Baptist.” He does not baptize Jesus. He doesn’t call people to repentance. He doesn’t confront them about their sin. He simply “testifies” to Christ. He is John the Testifier, John the Witness, not John the Baptist.

Listen to his testimony for a minute:

- I baptize with water.
- Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me;
- I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.

The next day:

- Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
- This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”
- I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.

Still further:

- I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.
- I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’
- I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.

When John bears witness to Jesus Christ, he twice says, “I *myself* did not know him”; and once he says, “Among you stands one whom *you* do not know.”

“This is the Son of God,” John says. “One whom you do not know.”

¹ See Matthew 3:1-12, Mark 1:2-8, and Luke 3:1-18.

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As I was typing these words from John into the computer – one whom you do not know – I became even more convinced that the answer I gave the person in our church is on target.

- The reticence of our tradition to use the name “Jesus” too easily is well-grounded in the witness of John the Baptist.
- John is as at home as we are with mystery and transcendence.
- John respects what I would label the “reverential unknowability” of Christ.

It is Christ’s mystery, and our reverence toward it, that lead us to be cautious about simply using the name “Jesus” too quickly.

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But if the Christ we worship is so cloaked in mystery that not even his witness “knows” him, can we really follow him at all?

Is Christ so “wrapped in swaddling unknowability” that he is powerless to enlist us in his cause?

If Christ is filled with mystery, how are we to know him?

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A theologian many of us have been studying this Fall helps us identify positive aspects of Jesus Christ we can know and follow. Listen to Richard Niebuhr who wrote over fifty years ago:²

- For some Christians...Jesus Christ is a *great teacher and lawgiver* who in what he said of God and the moral law so persuades the mind and will that there is henceforth no escape from him. Christianity is for them *a new law and a new religion* proclaimed by Jesus. In part it seems to be the cause which they have chosen; in part it is a cause which has chosen them, by wresting consent from their minds.

Do you know Jesus Christ as a great teacher and lawgiver; if so, are you following him into the new law and new religion he founded? If not, what prevents you?

- For others [Niebuhr continues] Jesus Christ is not so much a teacher and revealer of truths and laws as *in himself...the revelation of God...* [By] being what he is, by suffering what he did, by being defeated in crucifixion, and by returning victoriously from death, [Jesus Christ] makes evident the being and nature of God, exercises the claim of God on human faith, and thus raises to *a new life* the [people] he encounters.

Do you know Jesus Christ as the revelation of God? If so, have you turned your life over to the new life to which he raises you? If not, what prevents you?

- For still others [Niebuhr continues] Christianity is primarily neither new teaching nor new life but *a new community*, the Holy Catholic [or universal] Church; hence the work of Christ which occupies the center of their attention is his founding of this *new society* which mediates his grace through word and sacrament.

Do you know Jesus Christ as the founder of a new community which, by preaching and music, baptism and communion, draws you from other communities that define you, nourish you, or perhaps have their teeth into you? Have you given yourself over to this new community, the church of Jesus Christ? Have you really yet entered it? If not, what prevents you?

Niebuhr adds:

- Whatever roles [Christ] plays in the varieties of Christian experience, it is the same Christ who [lies behind them all.]
- However great the variations among Christians in experiencing and describing the authority Jesus Christ has over them, they have this in common: that *Jesus Christ is their authority*, and that the one who exercises these various kinds of authority is the same Christ.

Do you know Jesus Christ as new teacher, new life, new community?

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 12-13.

Are you ready to give yourself to Christ – perhaps more fully, perhaps more intentionally, perhaps for the first time – as you draw near to God and to yourself this season?

If not, what prevents you?

- *Pray for its removal.*
- *Take action toward its removal.*

Step into the new teaching, the new life, the new community which is Jesus Christ.

Amen.