

Advent 3B. John 1:6-8, 19-28. December 17, 2017.

Perhaps you are like me in having wondered what you would have done had you been there to be faced with John the Baptist. With Jesus it is easier. We can assume that we might have seen some miracle, eaten the miraculously multiplied bread and fish. Or failing that we might hope that the sheer power of his sanctity would relieve the doubts that always tether us to the familiar status quo. That the gentle irresistible force of his personality would infuse us with the courage to say in the moment of crisis “yes, you are the Son of God.” With John the Baptist it is different. We don’t have the miracles. We don’t have the hope that we would recognize divinity pulsing away behind his eyes.

As strange as John the Baptist is, the crisis of decision that we might face with him is more familiar. He doesn’t look particularly promising and he himself does not claim to be the answer—he tells us that there is another coming. He confronts us with a decision for the unknown. Repent and give your life for something that is coming but is not here yet. Change your entire life for something that is still unknown. It’s a big ask and there is nothing in the demeanor of this wild man to give us the comfort of knowing that at least we are in safe hands. There is plenty of room for doubt.

I have been thinking a lot this week about crises of decision because along with several other people both from here and from Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation, I found myself faced with one Monday night. And ever since that night, we from that room have been confronting others with that same crisis of decision. I am about to do it to you, and for those of you who do not have email or do not read church emails titled “Important News from St. Christopher’s,” I am going to do it in a pretty unfair way. Because it is a long story, and while I know that there will be a variety of responses to our decision, I am even more sure that there is only ever one response to a twenty minute sermon in this church.

If you have not read the letters from me and Senior Warden Hal Rees that went out by email on Wednesday, then I commend them to your attention. There are hard copies in the back of the church. And we will continue talking about this—after each service today we will have a discussion right here for you to ask questions and give your honest opinions for the better wisdom of your clergy and vestry. It was wisely pointed out to me that those who strongly disagree with the decision we have made may feel uncomfortable speaking out in front of everyone. If this is so, I entreat you to reach out to me or a vestry member privately. You may not change our minds and we may not change yours, but you will make us wiser and we crave these conversations.

In short, on Monday night we received a surprise request to house an undocumented immigrant who is applying for asylum refugee status after he was released from federal custody. There is a long story of why we were in a position to receive this request and how Donal, who prefers to go by his middle name Eduardo or his nickname Lalo, ended up needing someone to make it on his behalf. Again, I refer you to the letters I have mentioned and invite you into further conversation. We said yes and Lalo moved into Room 1 in the basement Wednesday night. With help from a few of us and a lot of people from Unity Temple, that room has been transformed into something better than where any of us lived during college or while we worked our first job. Attorneys have assured us that we are doing nothing illegal. Lalo is not in hiding. He has been released from custody and no law enforcement agency is seeking him.

In company with a few parishioners, I made this decision and the vestry affirmed it. Now, we all face a number of crisis decisions: will we make this work? How will we move forward together if we disagree? How will the majority take a stand for what they believe God is calling

them to do while also honoring the faithfulness and dignity of the minority? How much are we willing to give of ourselves for our convictions? Are we willing to be transformed by the work that—please God let it be—that we have been called to do?

I believe that John the Baptist can help us navigate this new life that our leadership's decisions have brought us to. Because he is not just a wild man confronting us with decisions about the unknown. He is also a powerful example of how to conduct ourselves once we have given ourselves to a calling. Two aspects of his character particularly leapt out to me this week as keys to our salvation: his humility and his assurance of precisely who he is.

I am tremendously impressed with John the Baptist's humility. He's out in the wilderness, and yet people are flocking to him. His ministry is flourishing. He is changing people's lives and doing incredible things, without compromising. And yet he never once makes the mistake of thinking that the point is his own heroism. From the beginning and all the way through to the end, he refuses to lose sight of the fact that he is doing this work for someone else. That he is not the star, that the ministry is not about himself—not even about his own holiness. Flatly and without ambiguity he says, "I am not the Messiah."

I don't know how long Lalo will be here. It may be determined rather quickly that he would rather be in someone's home or in a group setting. But if he is here for more than a couple weeks, we'll probably get some attention. And in a town like this, it will mostly be positive attention. We will be tempted to notice how holy we are, what brave risk-takers we are, how strongly we hold our convictions compared to those other churches. We will be tempted to let everyone who disagrees with us know that they are wrong, not because they misunderstand the gospel but because only we can be right. We might decide that we deserve adulation for our courage, and that therefore making decisions with an eye towards bringing more adulation is justified. We might start thinking that we know what is best for this young man and we will inform him of it, using him for our glory instead of serving Christ in him. We can accomplish supporting Lalo while being driven by a spirit of pride; but we can only serve God by supporting Lalo if we are fully rooted in humility.

John's humility is what enables him to know so clearly who he himself is. Because he has no illusions that he is God or Messiah, he is able to know clearly who he is. The religious leaders who come out to investigate him have a lot of categories that they want to fit him into. If he isn't the Messiah, then he must be Elijah. And if he is neither, then he must be the prophet. How tempting these categorical identities must have been for him! Not even because these are big important identities to take pride in, but just because if he had said yes, he would have been understood. But John is none of these things and he is unwilling to compromise the truth just so that he can be understood and accepted. He is fused completely with his mission: the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "make straight the way of the Lord."

I doubt that any of us as individuals or as a community have quite so clear a notion of who we are. It is generally taken as wisdom to consider our truest identities a mystery to be explored for our entire lives. I will just note that John's confidence in who he is is rooted in what he has been called to do: to cry out in the wilderness and make the Lord's paths straight. We as Christians have been called to follow Jesus in his own mission statement, read today from Isaiah: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. To proclaim God's grace and God's justice. To comfort all who mourn. Each of us of course is many things: businesspeople and patriots and family members and political party members and friends of certain people and citizens of certain villages, cities, and states. And these various roles call us to many actions. The fact that we are Christians has called us to this work. We do this because Jesus Christ is our Lord. Amen.