

Who Are You?
A Sermon on John 1:6-8, 19-28
Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2017

Introduction

I wish the controversy on saying Merry Christmas instead of Happy Holidays would go away. Christians need to worry more about getting their own houses in order than on forcing themselves on other people. I agree with the sign in front of Fellowship Congregational Church in Tulsa this week, where my friend Chris Moore is the pastor: Let's Put Christ Back in Christians.

Part of putting our own houses in order is celebrating Advent. We are not to Christmas yet on the church calendar. That is next Sunday. Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. This is the season of preparing for the light of God to come into our lives through the person of Jesus.

This is an Advent text that doesn't mention Jesus by name. There is nothing in today's text that romanticizes Christmas. The focus is on John the Baptist and his role in testifying to the light.

Joseph Campbell reminds us not to mistake the light bulb for the light. Light is a universal symbol for enlightenment or spiritual consciousness in world religions.

First Move: Plato's Cave

One of the most famous examples of light as an image for enlightenment is in Book VII of *The Republic*. Plato uses the image of a cave to describe the ignorance of our human condition.

Imagine an underground cave, deep within the earth. There is a long entrance to the cave, open to daylight at the top. Inside the cave are men who have been prisoners since childhood. Their legs and necks are in chains. They are facing away from the light and cannot turn their heads. Higher up the entrance, a fire is burning. Between the fire and the prisoners is a wall, like the screen at puppet shows.

Then imagine there are people behind the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts to project, statues of people and animals and other things that are drawn from life.

What will the prisoners see on the wall in front of them? Shadows of the artifacts that the puppeteers are manipulating. The shadows are cast by the light from the fire behind them onto the wall of the cave in front of them. If the prisoners talked

to each other, they would assume that the shadows in front of them were the real thing.

Some of the puppeteers are talking and some are silent. And if the wall in front of the prisoners reflected sound, they would suppose that the voice belonged to the shadow in front of them. They would believe that the shadows were the what was really real.

What would happen if one of the prisoners was released from his chains and led to the fire behind him? This would be painful; he would be too dazzled by the light to focus on the objects that were casting shadows on the wall below. What if you told him that what he used to see was empty nonsense and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more accurately? Wouldn't he be at a loss and still believe that what he used to see was truer than the objects now being pointed out to him?

And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, he would shield his eyes and retreat to the things he could see more easily.

And if he were forcibly dragged up the steep road leading to the top of the cave and dragged into the sunlight, he would suffer even more pain. He would be dazzled and it would take him a while to grow accustomed to the light. First he would find it easier to look at shadows on the ground or reflections in the water. Later he would look at the objects themselves. Then he would look at the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night. He would look at the light of the moon and the stars. Last, he would look directly at the sun and gaze at it and see it as it really is.

As he had time to study the sun and its effects around him, he would conclude that the sun was responsible for the changing of the seasons and controls everything in the visible world.

When he thinks back on his first home, he would congratulate himself on his good fortune and feel sorry for the prisoners. There was honor and glory to be won among the prisoners and prizes for remembering the order in which the shadows appeared on the wall and for predicting when they would next appear. Will the released prisoner desire those prizes or envy this honor and glory after he has seen the sun?

If he went back to sit at his old seat in the cave, his eyes would be blinded by the darkness because he has come out of the sunlight. If he had to discriminate between the shadows while he was still blinded, he would appear to be a fool to the other prisoners. They would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight. They would kill him if he tried to release them and lead them up.

For Plato, the cave is an allegory for the journey of the mind. The sun represents the Good; whatever could be seen at lower levels was a form of the Good. The Good is the natural object of man's reason.

Second Move: Testifying to the Light

Christians see the light as something else. In the Prologue, all things come about through the Logos. What has come about through the Logos is eternal life, and eternal life is the light of men.

John was sent by God to testify to the light. John is not idealized as the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel. He does not wear camel's hair and does not eat locusts and wild honey. He does not call the people a brood of vipers and does not exhort them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Instead, his sole function is to testify. The Greek word for testify is μαρτυρέω. It is a word that comes from the courtroom. It means to be a witness to, to testify, to confirm something based on personal knowledge. It is where our word for martyr comes from. The verb and noun forms of μαρτυρέω appear 33 times in the Gospel of John, but only three times in the rest of the Gospels. Testimony or witness is a major theme in the Gospel of John. It is witnesses who call people to faith. They lead them to the light.

This is an official interrogation by priests and Levites; they are sent by the high priest in Jerusalem. They ask John, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny. Again, this is courtroom language. Without being asked, he denies that he is the Messiah. They ask, "What then? Are you Elijah?" According to 2 Kings, Elijah did not die but was taken into heaven on a chariot. Jewish apocalyptic texts speculated that Elijah would return at the end times. John replies, "I am not." Jesus uses "I am" sayings throughout the Gospel of John. To say "I am not" is another way of distinguishing John from Jesus. They ask if he is the prophet, a reference to a prophet like Moses that was prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:15. John says, "No."

The author uses ten negatives in 13 verses to dissociate John from the Messiah and set aside conventional expectations of salvation through the Messiah.

Again, the priests and Levites ask, "Who are you?" John affirmed [another courtroom word]: "I [am] a voice, shouting out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' just as the prophet Isaiah said."

The way of the Lord in Isaiah 40:3 describes a path across the desert from Babylon to Judah. God would bring the exiles home. In John's day, there were no exiles. The people of Israel were already home. Prepare the way of the Lord could be a way of saying, "Clear out all the clutter." The desert could be your own soul. The

German mystic, Meister Eckhart, said that God is found in the soul not by adding but by subtracting.

The good news in the Gospel of John is the coming of the light into our lives. We are awakened to the light within us. John calls that light eternal life.

Christians have often literalized eternal life to mean an afterlife in heaven. In the Gospel of John, people enjoy eternal life right now when they experience life in all its fullness.

Third Move: Testifying to Each Other

Who are you? John the Baptist answers that question in two stages. The first is to confess who we are not. We are more than the conventional labels and roles that society hangs on us and that we conform to. Tribal consciousness is part of the problem today. You are more than a member of this ethnic group, this profession, this political party, a fan of this sports team. That is your False Self. Part of our faith journey is discovering who we truly are. The light within us shows us our True Self.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion* says that having a deep awareness of one's identity is one of the most important aspects of developing a lively spiritual life. Jesus says, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Butler Bass asks, "How can we love either God or our neighbor unless we know and love ourselves?"

Who are you? The second stage is a clear understanding of who you are. John the Baptist says that he is a voice, shouting out in the wilderness. John knows his role in God's story.

Butler Bass says that people today don't know who they are. Mainline denominations are hemorrhaging members. Protestants are taking on generic religious identities or leaving the faith entirely. Religious decline means countless numbers of people today are suffering a sense of loss. They are grieving that their churches are declining, that their children are going away from church and that the traditions they love might disappear.

We see the institutions of civil society crumbling. We worry about our schools, the health care system, the criminal justice system. We worry about whether democracy is collapsing, whether civility and decency are disappearing. Aristotle argued that the primary purpose of the *polis* is the creation of people who are better than they would be without the aid of the *polis*. Does our culture make us better people?

Butler Bass believes that churches need to ask the question, "Who are we in God?" That is one of the classical questions of Christian spirituality. Jesus asks his

disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” He follows up with, “Who do you say that I am?” That takes us directly to the next question, “Who am I?”

When we are reading the gospels, we focus on Jesus. Butler Bass suggests that we expand our focus to include not only Jesus’ identity but the identity of the other people in the story. The most important question may be the identity of the other people in the story. How do Jesus’ friends and acquaintances gain new insights when they are in Jesus’ company?

If we ask, “Who am I?”, we plunge into the mysteries of ourselves and peel away layers of conformity and self-delusion. We learn who we really are when God is right there with us.

The author’s message in today’s text is that we are awakened to the light through testimony. Faith is a response to testimony. Who has given you testimony? Who awakened you from your spiritual slumber?

A major theme in *Resident Aliens*, the book that we just finished in our Wednesday night group, is that salvation comes through the church. The faith journey for Christians is something that is done in community. Faith is more than Jesus and me. It is about Jesus and the disciples, Jesus and the church.

The goal is to deepen our faith. There are stages of faith development and stages of consciousness. Depending on which author you read and what they are focusing on, there are five, six, eight, ten or 12 stages. Whatever stage you are in, it is hard to move to the next stage by yourself. You can’t leap into a new stage; you have to live through each stage and grow into the next stage.

Spiritual guides and mentors can help. We can learn from someone who is farther along on their journey. They testify to us. They show us the spiritual practices that enrich their lives. They share their understanding of Scripture with us. We grow in faith by imitating them and listening to their perspective.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is usually interpreted as making new disciples of all the nations. It can also be translated as discipling the nations. Teaching, instructing in the ways of Jesus. Building discipleship in people who are already Christians. The Greek word for disciple is μαθητής. Before the word was appropriated by Christians, it meant student or apprentice. It was used to describe students of a philosopher. There were disciples of Plato and Aristotle.

We each have a responsibility to testify to other Christians. Each of us is a teacher and a student. We share with others what we have learned on our faith journeys. We have been led from the bottom of the cave, maybe not yet to the daylight outside the cave, but to the light a little higher up on the path that leads out

of the cave. As we testify to the light, we embody the light and share it with other people.

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Protestant theologian, was imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp for two years before he was executed just before Germany surrendered in World War II. However many stages of faith development and consciousness there are in your model, Bonhoeffer was at the highest stage, along with Jesus of Nazareth, Gandhi, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu.

Bonhoeffer wrote letters and poems while he was in prison to help keep his sanity. One of those poems is called *Who Am I?* It was written in July 1944, after he had been in prison for a year.

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune equally, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

We find ourselves in God when we strike out with other pilgrims on the Way, when we risk exile from society for ignoring its conventions, when we share our secret longings and deepest convictions with fellow travelers who come from different places and different generations, saints and sinners of all sorts, when we awaken to the light within us, when we testify to the light and when we hear the testimony of others.

Who am I? O God, I am Thine!

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