**John 1:6-8,19-27** December 17, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Advent 4

*John 1:19Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Christ.’” 21They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ ”*

*24 Now some Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26“I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. 27He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**If You Think You Know the Answer…**

Something about trick questions… Maybe you don’t fall for the bait, but just about anything that claims to be a trick question gets my attention. When we hear “Trick question!” we want to prove that we are smarter than the average bear. “Maybe 98% of the people get it wrong, but not me! Bring it on! Ask the question! I’m ready!” And we listen. And we see right through it. And we give the answer. And we are wrong! And even though we have just proven ourselves just as gullible as everybody else, in our minds we start making excuses, “Yeah, but I thought you meant so-and-so.” Or “I was in a hurry, and if I had as much time to sit around and think of answers as you have to make silly questions, I would have nailed it.” Or, hear’s the best one: “I knew the answer. I was just testing you!” We walk away, still sure, contrary to everything we have just proven, still sure that we are smarter than the average bear.

Well, I guess, as long as we can laugh about it. But we would all be better off if we realized that we aren’t quite as clever as we imagine we are.

Often we are so overconfident of our own understanding that even when the undiluted facts are in front of us, we still prefer *our* way of thinking. It is a gift, a blessing, to be able to ask sincere questions and to *listen to* the answers. It’s worth thinking about this truth as we start today’s reading.

**I. Listen and Be Surprised**

Our preconceived notions can distort what we hear from God’s Word. For example, what do you think about these people who came to John the Baptist and asked, ***“Who are you?”*** We are so used to the animosity of the religious establishment in Jesus’ day toward Jesus, that we think we know what is going on in our reading. We think that they are coming to John the Baptist to tear him down.

This reading took place before Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah. John the Baptist was getting the way ready for Jesus. Now John was doing some strange and different things. No miracles, but his teaching was energizing and popular, drawing in people from all over Palestine. And also, while the Jewish people did have ceremonial washings in the law of Moses, they did not have anything like the *“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mk 1:4) that John the Baptist preached.

So the religious authorities sent out scouts to ask, ***“Who are you?”*** We jump to the conclusion: “There those guys go again. They are always trying to trip up and trap God’s messengers.”

Not so. These spiritual watchmen of Israel were supposed to be asking, “What is this new preaching? Who is this man?” As God’s religious watchmen, they were checking it out to see if John was on the up and up.

Nothing in their questions betrays hostility toward John and his message. They are just asking. John assumes that they are asking the right things for the right reasons. He does not condemn them. He doesn’t confront them. (Later he would, but not at this stage yet.) He tells them straight up, ***“I am not the Christ… I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”***

A clear answer to a good questoin. That is where we should place ourselves in this narrative. In at least this one way, let us be like the questioners of John. Let us be willing to admit that we don’t have all the answers. Even more, may we be willing to at least consider that some of the answers we have might not be the right answers! Let us regularly go where we can find God’s guidance and listen. Let us repent of insisting that our religious preferences trump anything objectionable in a church body, or a pastor, or even God’s Word. Put on listening ears, *especially* when God’s Word tells us things we don’t want to hear.

The lead-up to Christmas is a great time to do this. We know the Christmas story so well that we practically have it memorized. We know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We know Bethlehem was the city of David. We know about the Wise Men, and we also know that we don’t know how many Wise Men there were. We know about the angels and the shepherds. We know about Caesar Augustus and a certain decree. We even know about a guy named Quirinius. What more could there possibly be to the Christmas story?

This is the danger of being a Bible Jeopardy champion. We may know all the facts about Christmas, but none of us will ever know all the truth of Christmas. Watch Mary and Joseph. Listen to the angels. Hear the shepherds. Don’t pretend that you know all the answers. Be a learner, even in God’s Christmas story which you could rattle off from memory. When we let the Holy Spirit speak to us and stop pretending that knowledge has its birth and death with us, we hear new things in God’s message. Then, even this old story will bring smiles to our faces. Though we have heard it hundreds of times, we will be on the edge of our seats with expectation.

That’s where John the Baptist was. One of the kind of funny things about John the Baptist is that John had surprisingly little information about the Messiah. One would think that since he was the forerunner of the Messiah, he knew everything about Jesus. But what does John say? In our reading he can only say someone greater than him is coming. Soon after our reading, John himself admitted, *“I myself did not know him… I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me told me’”* (1:33). Later in his ministry, John specially asked Jesus, *“Are you the one who was to come?”* Even John the Baptist, the voice in the desert prophesied by Isaiah, had to contiually go to Jesus and listen.

We can never un-know Jesus, nor would I want any of us to. But we benefit spiritually, when we stop being so sure that we know everything about Jesus and God and God’s word and instead search God’s word and listen to what he says. Let him challenge our suppositions. Let God’s word tell us that the sins we make excuses for are really sin. Let God remind us that he does ordain difficulties in our lives that we may remain close to him, and that he often allows them to continue though we pray to the contrary. Let us listen to God as he tells us to loosen our Scrooge-like grip on our time and money. Let God’s word remind us that Christ has *completely* taken away all the guilt of sin.

Let us go to Bethlehem and wait for the Christ-child. And in a few days when he appears and is lovingly placed in the feed trough, let us sincerely ask with the poet, “What child is this who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping? Why lies he in such mean estate?” Ask those questions, and before you answer your own questions, listen to God’s answers. Truly, what child is this? One that chose such a humble birth. One who chose to live through 30 years of anonymity before revealing his mission to save the world. One who died in agony. One who returned from death.

Don’t pretend to know all the answers. Listen to God giving the answers.

**II. And Be Ready to Share The Answer**

But we are not the only ones with questions. You have friends who share their family difficulties with you. You have co-workers who talk about the jig-saw puzzles of problems and joys they experience. Sometimes they even ask advice. And sometimes they look at you and ask the question asked of John in verse 25, *“Why do you act the way you do?”*

All of those are perfect times to give the answer that John gave, ***“He confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ… but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’”*** Do you notice how boldly, how directly, John points people to The Answer?

Now John was a little different from us. He was sent by God, it was his life’s mission, to testify to Christ. We testify to Christ, but we are not called to stand out in the desert, or on a street corner. But we are called to testify to Jesus in each place that God has put us.

And as we live in this world, those times will arise. People will notice when you don’t cuss like a sailor. They will notice you don’t share in the work-place gossip mill. They will notice when you bite your tongue instead of lashing out, when you refuse the extra drink, when you don’t laugh at the dirty joke. And people will wonder why you act the way you do. There will come a time when like the Pharisees asking John in verse 25, they will ask you, “Why do you act the way you do?” And we can respond with the words of John, “There is ***one, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”***

Now John could have felt a little bit proud that he had given up everything for Jesus. He could have looked down his nose at these spiritual slackers every time he crunched down one of those locusts, or got a little itchy under that camel’s hair clothing. He could have thought, “Look at what I have done for God.” Instead he professed, ***“One comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”***

I don’t think you heard what he just said! A popular show we used to watch a few seasons ago was *Downton Abbey.* It was kind of funny how even the staff (the servants and cooks, etc) would be so class-conscious. If anyone thought that a certain task was below their pay-grade, the would get very huffy about it. “No footman should ever have to *(fill in the blank)*.”

Servants in a Jewish household would also be very pay-grade conscious, especially when it came to feet. You know how Jesus stunned his disciples that one night—by washing their feet. This has been a constant in the Middle East for thousands of years. Much more recently you may remember in 2003 when the crowds in Iraq rejoiced over the downfall of Sadam Hussein, what were they doing to his portraits? They were smacking the portraits with their sandals. That was the greatest insult they could give him. Middle East culture has this thing about feet to this day. In Jesus’ day, untying sandals and washing feet was a job for the lowest ranking servant in the house. When John said, ***“I am not even worthy to untie his sandals”*** John said that not only was he not on par with the Messiah, he don’t even deserve to be a servant in his house, not even the lowest servant in his house!

What a proper sort of humility to be found in Jesus’ people as we point others to him. How dare we give the impression that we have been more worthy than others! How dare we look down on unbelievers, whether money grubbers or drug addicts. We must confess that what makes Jesus so great is precisely how unworthy *we* were. Each and every one of us needed a Savior from birth. And even now as we try to live lives honoring Jesus, we admit that we still need daily forgiveness from him.

John’s is the best possible answer. Not only does it point out The Answer, it point out our need for The Answer.

Do you think you know The Answer? Of course. That’s why we are here. But by the Holy Spirit living in your heart, may you have the wisdom and courage to listen to God for the answers, and to point others to God for the answers.