

“Joy in Diversity”
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
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Isaiah 60:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Who are you? In this first scene of the Gospel of John, John the Baptist testified to the light of Jesus Christ by answering the question, “Who are you?”

How would you answer this question? Who do you say that you are?

John the Baptist knew that the priests and Levites who came from Jerusalem to question him did so in order to maintain the religious power held in Jerusalem. Unlike our Mark text last week which simply described John’s baptism ministry in the wilderness, the narrative in the book of John begins with questioning from religious authorities and testimony from John about his ministry.

Despite the risks of sharing with these powerful men, John the baptist was open and honest about who he was and who he was not. John confessed that he was not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. He was a new character prophesied about in the book of Isaiah, “the voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

John had been called since before his birth to be this special minister - preparing the people for the way of the Lord. It is unclear how long John practiced this ministry of baptism in the wilderness before these priests showed up, but it is clear from his response to these men that John is confident in his identity and ready to respond as John the Baptist. I can sense the joy in his words when he identifies himself in scripture. I can feel the joy extending from John’s hope that Jesus is coming. There is joy - for John - in living out his calling from God - baptizing with water.

I break this passage down into three parts:

Part 1: the question: “Who are you?”

Part 2: John’s response: “He confessed.”

Part 3: His naming: “I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

Part 1: Who are you?

How do you identify yourself? What are the attributes you share in describing yourself in a job interview, at a party or at church?

I am a chaplain. I spent over a year training specifically as a chaplain after three years of seminary and many more years of ministry leadership. I can say with joy that I am a chaplain, even when I am not working in my hospital setting - even when I am introduced to someone who doesn’t understand what a chaplain is or why spiritual care might be important.

When my spouse saw a mouse in our kitchen last week, I responded as a chaplain - caring for her spiritual and emotional needs. She responded, “I am going to need more from you than that!”

Living out my calling as a chaplain - as a pastoral care provider - brings me joy and fulfillment.

So when I saw a car crash into the sidewall of the interstate on my drive home a month ago, I decided to stop and see if I could help in the sudden emergency. I parked my car, ran over to the accident

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scene, and assessed the situation. Other drivers had also stopped. At least one person had called 911, so I approached the crashed car. Two women and a young girl - maybe three years old - were laying in the grass behind the car, crying. The car looked as if it could roll backward onto them, so I introduced myself and asked if they would join me in a safer location.

These women were in shock and not quite able to understand my request, but eventually we all moved. And as we moved, the women noticed the driver - still in the car - a young man who was not conscious. At this site, they began to weep and then to wail - running over the the man and then crying out in despair. Another driver and I attended to the young girl - asking if she was in pain and then making sure she could stay warm.

I too began to despair. The police arrived and began to ask questions to assess the scene. I stepped back and noticed a dozen small holes in the driver-side door where the man still sat lifeless. I took another step back, as I realized what was later confirmed - that this was a highway shooting that brought trauma into each of the lives in this family. Their safety - and even my safety - was put at risk to commit this act of violence that day.

I left the scene once the paramedics arrived to care for the family. Instead of joy, I felt sadness. Instead of confidence, I questioned if I had done any good at all.

Later that evening, I joined my spouse, Abbi, at a storytelling event, called the Moth. I took time to process this trauma that I had witnessed and experienced. Abbi was very supportive of me, and with a heavy heart, I entered the show.

A young woman took the stage, she was proud to share that she was just 16 years old and already an award winning storyteller. The crowd cheered!

She told us the story of her encounter with gun violence. There was some shouting at the gas station across the street from her house and a gun shot rang out. Several young men came running through the neighborhood and she heard a knock on the door. When she opened the door, she found a young man holding his neck with blood dripping down his chest. He said, “I’ve been shot. Can you help me?”

Instead of reacting out of fear as one might expect, she responded out of deep joy. She invited him in, dressed his wound and applied pressure and then asked if she could call 911 for medical help. She did all of this out of her joy because this was her calling! She had been trained for exactly this moment! Just weeks before, she had gone through an urban emergency first response training where she learned how to treat a gunshot victim and how to treat their wounds as well! This was a training by the Ujima Umedics organization that developed out of the African American community in Chicago to empower lifegiving support from and for the underserved African American community, saying “We offer trainings in urban emergency first response, primarily to people who live in, or love people who live in communities where shootings often occur. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for and we’re much more wise and powerful than we often think we are.

This young woman was so filled with joy that this man had picked her to help him in his time of need. She was filled with joy because she knew exactly what to do and how to do it. She was filled with joy because she already had an opportunity to help her neighbor with her newly found skills. She was so filled with joy, that while they were waiting for the paramedics to arrive, she was singing just to brighten the mood! She responded out of joy to live out her calling.

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We too can learn how to be prepared to respond to our calling. Sometimes, however, the first step is identifying who we are and what we are called to be. In the shock of my experience on the highway with this traumatized family, I responded as a chaplain and grieved that as a chaplain, I could not do more to support them in the midst of the emergency. But hearing the story of this young woman helped me realize that I had responded out of my calling. I had responded as a chaplain, as a pastor - with spiritual and emotional support. I responded out of my calling, but I needed time to name that calling in my new traumatic context.

Part 2: He confessed.

John the Baptist confessed to being the voice that cries out in the wilderness. Who do we confess to be? How do we name ourselves? We might identify ourselves by our employment, by our family relationships, or even by our religion, but what if we, like John the baptist, claimed our identity from scripture.

Let's look through our Isaiah passage for today. *Do you feel called to any of these identities today?*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me 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 the year of the Lord's favor,
to comfort all who mourn;

Or maybe you identify more with this:

They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Or maybe you identify more with this:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

Or maybe your calling is more based in praise like this:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

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so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

We are each called by God into the ministry of Jesus Christ to love God completely and to love our neighbor as well as ourselves. We may hide from this identity in certain spaces and certain company, but God’s calling is always there tugging on our spirits to show us the way. And when we do realize our calling, it is first necessary to prepare for that calling.

As we enter this last week of Advent, I invite you to continue in our collective work to prepare. Prepare for our coming Lord, Jesus Christ. Prepare for the coming Kingdom of God that is made manifest in our relationship with God. And prepare for our particular callings - first by taking time to identify ourselves as God’s child with unique gifts that lead us to our unique callings in God’s love. And then prepare for our particular calling by allowing ourselves to practice, to learn about, to empower ourselves to have confidence in our calling.

For when we can live in the confidence of our calling with Christ, we can respond to the needs of the world with great joy!

John the Baptist exclaimed to audience, “I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.”

What joy might we also experience if we found ourselves living out our calling from God.

I invite you to take a couple minutes to pray and to write in your prayer card about your calling. How do you identify yourself with God? Who are you as a child of God? What has God called you to be in this body of Christ? And how might you continue to prepare to live out that calling in the world today?

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

As people clothed in God’s salvation, let us grow in confidence as we prepare to live out our calling anew this day.

Amen.