

The Year of the Lord's Favor

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Third Sunday of Advent

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⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

The sentence from this story that has been with me all week long, that I can't stop thinking about, is the statement by John the Baptist: "**Among you stands one you do not know.**"

As often happens to me – I assume this happens to you as well – I had never really noticed these words before.

They have been here all along, of course, but for some reason I had never paid much attention.

As you heard, John the Baptist is speaking to a group of **investigators** who have been sent from Jerusalem to the Jordan River to make a report. So, they are there with their notebooks open, pens in hand, and they are observing everything carefully, making detailed observations.

Everyone else is there for a revival. Everyone else has come to hear the best speaker of that generation – and then, who knows, they might allow themselves to be baptized. Most of them seem to have been baptized.

So, the other people are there for what might be the most exciting event of their lives.

But the investigators have come with a different purpose. They are there to get to the bottom of things. They want to find out the truth. They listen to John the Baptist's words with objectivity, academic distance. They are not going to be moved. Emotion is not what they bring. They are going to analyze.

“Who are you?” they ask John the Baptist. **“If you're not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet [whoever that is], then who are you exactly?”**

It's quite a dramatic scene.

And as John – not John the Baptist, but John the Evangelist, John the gospel writer – is putting his gospel together, he decides that this scene belongs at the very beginning of the gospel.

Matthew and Luke begin with birth stories, as you know. Jesus is born to Mary and Joseph, he comes into the world as a baby, and we all know how that goes. And Mark – I don't know – he seems to be in such a hurry to tell the story that he doesn't bother with much of an introduction at all. He starts at a sprint and never lets up.

But John – I'm trying to get inside the mind of a writer here as he looks at all of the material spread out in front of him – John decides that the place to start is with this scene and with this statement.

“Among you stands one you do not know.” Those are the words I couldn't stop thinking about this week.

It's quite a clever way to begin, don't you think? The whole gospel then becomes an explanation. Let me tell you, he seems to say, who this one is.

You know, as a preacher, I have great sympathy for John – John the Baptist and John the gospel writer.

Many people come to church hoping something will happen. They hope to hear a word that will startle them, that will bring them into the presence of God. Like the people who came to hear John the Baptist, they are open and receptive, and they really want a good message.

But then there are always those with their arms folded, scientific minds engaged, detached from it all, analyzing and evaluating. This has been true throughout my ministry. This is not a description of IPC.

And I don't think I was quite prepared for it when I started.

When I started all those years ago, I assumed that everyone was like me. I was no skeptic, not by the time I was ordained. I was a true believer. I had thrown away my whole life – every other option, all those other career choices, not that there were that many – all gone – to do this one thing.

I was all in as a young pastor.

And then, I was too nervous to notice on my first Sunday, my first year maybe, but slowly I became aware of the investigators, those who had been sent from Jerusalem to take a good, hard look at what was going on. They would sit there on Sunday mornings as though they would have to make a report later.

And so, I began to think about them when I prepared my sermons. And over the years, I have started to think like John – John the gospel writer. I need to begin with the statement, **“Among you stands one you do not know.”**

And then – this is what I have tried to do – I need to explain why someone might want to know him, why he is worth getting to know, why he could change everything – and in fact does change everything.

Before I go any further here I need to point out how odd this situation in our story for today really is. Jesus has no star power, no celebrity. Did you notice that?

Over the years, I’ve heard so many stories about people – they’re usually movie stars and politicians – they walk into a room and suddenly all eyes are on them. People watch them and can’t take their eyes away. Oh, he’s getting out his car. Now she’s walking! How fascinating!

I haven’t met very many celebrities over the years, but the one time I met a famous TV personality I became all tongue-tied and said something really stupid.

Interestingly, that’s not how Jesus is introduced to us. Among you stands one you do not know.

Of course, when Jesus taught, later in the gospel story, people paid attention. As the gospels put it, he **“taught as one having authority,”** so clearly there was something extraordinary about him. People came long distances to hear his messages, and they remembered what he said for years afterward.

But Jesus – and I think John wants us to see this – Jesus did not come into the world as a celebrity. As Isaiah predicted many years before, he had **“no form, nor comeliness that we should desire him.”** This in Isaiah 53. **“There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,”** as one translation puts it, **“nothing to attract us to him.”**

What everyone noticed about him was not how good looking he was. Or how well dressed or well proportioned. What they noticed was that he was like us.

You know, we live at a time when there are all sorts reminders of social class and distinction. When you fly, you can’t help but notice. The platinum deluxe card holders go first, and then first class and business class, and (in the U.S.) then military personnel. And then the rest of us, the awful dregs of humanity are allowed to board.

And what’s interesting to me – I have imagined this scene by the Jordan River many times – there is no VIP express lane for baptism. Jesus stood in line with everyone else. He didn’t ask for elite status. He stood and waited his turn.

I have always liked that about the church too, by the way. I can't think of any other organizations that work quite this way. There are no special classes of membership. You know, if you have a platinum membership, you get to be first in line at coffee hour. There is something wonderful about the nature of church life.

No one counts more or is worth more than anyone else.

And it was Jesus who – from the beginning of his ministry – set the tone. We are born in the image and likeness of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. You may have many credentials and degrees and certificates and so on, good for you, but when you come to this place, the only honor that matters is your baptism, the same “honor,” if you can call it that, the same “honor” that Jesus had when he started his ministry.

He was baptized ... by John ... in the Jordan.

Last fall, as some of you will remember, we took a long, long look at Nehemiah, and several times I called him a “**type of Christ,**” someone who teaches us what Christ will look like.

Well, the story of Nehemiah reaches its climax when the wall around Jerusalem is finished and all of the critics are silenced, and it's time for Nehemiah to take a bow, to finally receive the applause that he deserves.

But instead of taking a bow and soaking in all of the appreciation, he takes a step back – remember? – and at that point he all but disappears from the story. It's Ezra the priest who moves out front and reads the law. And Nehemiah is nowhere to be found. Ego seems to have no place in his leadership. What he came to do was not to promote himself, but to build a wall and then a people.

And that, of course, was Jesus too. He drew no attention to himself. I came, he would say later, to bring life and to bring it abundantly...for you and me.

To all of the investigators who have listened to me over the years, I have tried to say, “**If you want to follow someone with your life, make sure to choose someone who has no need to be admired, no need to be worshiped, no ego that needs to be stroked.**”

Here's something else that I think you should see on this Third Sunday of Advent.

Earlier this morning we heard words from Isaiah 61, and of course these were the words that Jesus read one Sabbath when he was invited to speak at his hometown synagogue.

On my most recent visit to Israel, our tour group stopped in Nazareth at this synagogue – or what is left of it – and I took out my Bible and began to read...

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,*

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And I don't know if you remember that story or not, but when Jesus finished reading, after he handed the scroll back to the attendant, we're told that all eyes were fixed on him.

And I don't know if you've ever imagined that situation, but I have. I've tried to understand what Jesus was doing there. You go home as an adult. Everyone remembers you as a child, but you go home as an adult.

And really, they just want you to do a good job, so that they can be proud of you. And the story tells us that they whispered together, "**That's Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter.**" They were so glad to see him.

In front of your parents and their friends, the degree of difficulty is not very high. Just say thank you to your Sunday school teachers, tell a funny story about something you did as a child in that synagogue, how you dropped the offering on the floor, maybe, and how much noise it made during worship, but whatever you do, don't make people mad.

But that's exactly what Jesus did, didn't he? He had a total lack of concern for how people would respond to him. He spoke the truth...not occasionally, but all the time.

He said, "**I know you came here today to see how I turned out, but you need to know what God is up to in the world. God is working on behalf of the poor. God is concerned about the prisoners. God is determined to bring sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed of the world go free.**"

What a mistake. He made them so angry. And they tried to kill him.

Jesus, this person you do not know, cares nothing about being liked. He cares only about the truth. He cares only about the mission of God in the world. He cares only about the poor, the prisoner, the blind, and the oppressed.

If you are here today investigating, if you are taking notes today, write that down. Jesus doesn't care what you think you about him. He did not come into the world to make you smile. He came because there was work to do. Write that down in your notebook.

Four and a half years ago, when I was interviewing with Council members and members of the search committee at IPC, we were sitting in the home of one of our members, quite a large group of people in one living room.

And one of our elders – I obviously haven't forgotten much about this particular evening – one of the elders said to me, "**Doug, would you tell us about a time when you led someone to Christ?**"

I don't remember anymore exactly what I said, but I do remember stumbling around quite a bit in my answer. The way the question was phrased is not the faith language that I learned, which may seem surprising to you, but it's not how learned to talk about my faith.

Where I grew up, we just didn't talk about leading people to Christ, although I just preached an entire sermon about introducing people to "**the one among you, you do not know.**"

Anyway, partly because my answer to that question was so awful, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how I should have answered it. There are no do-overs in life, sadly, but if I had a do-over on that question, this is what I would say.

The last church I served had an active prison ministry. Every week a large group of men and women would go to a nearby prison, and they would lead worship and Bible studies. I did not go every week, but I went occasionally.

And over time that prison ministry expanded to include ministry to families on the outside. Typically, the incarcerated men and women would be very concerned about family members who lived nearby, and so the church became very involved in the lives of those family members as well, especially at Christmas time.

It was through this ministry that I came to know Shay Green, an African American teenager who started coming to youth group, although no other members of youth group had a father in prison. No other members of the youth group faced any of the obstacles in life that Shay Green faced.

Not getting pregnant by age 18 was – for her – quite a significant accomplishment.

One summer, on the youth mission trip – we went somewhere every summer for a week of work – I found myself painting the wall of a house with Shay Green. And we had 6 or 7 hours together in the Florida sunshine.

And over the course of six or seven hours, I heard the story of her life. I don't know how much painting we did, or how good it was, but Shay Green and I had the best conversation that I have ever had.

I realized that she was a remarkable person and that she was going to make it out of the miserable circumstances into which she had been born. She had all the gifts and skills she needed to make it.

But for one thing. She had no father. Hers was locked up and was not getting out for a long, long time. And so we talked about that.

And I said, **“What are you thinking about church and youth group and all the stuff you're hearing? Does any of it make sense?”**

And she said – and these are the words that keep me going on difficult days – she said, **“I now know that I have a father ... in heaven. And he has never let me down. In fact, he makes it possible for me to love my father here.”**

Shay Green did not come to church as an investigator, with an analytical mind. She came to us as one in need, and she listened with a hopefulness that her life might be changed. And it was.

I don't know if you consider yourself an investigator, or if you are more like Shay Green, but whoever you are, I want to say to you that there is one among us today whom you do not know. I am not worthy to bend down and untie his shoelaces.

But over the course of my life I have come to know him, and more than anything I would like you to know him as well. What a wonderful Christmas present that would be.

