“Who are you?” How you and I answer the question usually depends on the context and who is asking. When I’m in a doctor’s office and handed a clipboard and pen, on the form I tell the doctor who I am according to what matters to that person. I’m Linda Motley, female, with this birthdate and this address and this medical history, with this insurance coverage and today’s medical complaint. When others ask who I am, I tell them what I think will make sense to them. To some who might find it interesting or relevant, I say I’m a pastor. To others who know someone in my family, I’m Billy’s wife or Norah and Jesse’s daughter or Gary’s sister or Maggie’s step-mother. To others with whom I might have something else in common, I’m a graduate of this place and that, I’ve lived in all these places, I’m a baseball fan and I make jewelry. All of these things about me are true and accurate and factual. But none really gets at who I am at my core, in the most fundamental and important way, in the way that was made real and permanent at my baptism.

“Who are you?” Some priests and Levites came out from Jerusalem to ask John that very question. They had heard about him in Jerusalem, about how he urged people to repent from their sins and how he baptized many people who came to him. “Who are you?” the church officials asked John. Listen to how he answered: “I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet.” Those negative declarations gave the men who were asking some information, but it didn’t tell them much about the man in front of them. So they asked again, “Who are you? What do you say about yourself?” “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” The men still weren’t satisfied with John’s enigmatic answers. They wanted to know why he was baptizing people if he wasn’t the Messiah or Elijah reincarnated or a prophet. Again, John spoke, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.”

We aren’t told how the officials reacted to John’s words. If they had been around the next day, they would have seen John meeting Jesus on the road and exclaiming, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” I wonder if the church guys would still have pushed John for an answer, “We know who HE is but who are YOU?” John had already answered the question, though maybe not in a way that convinced his questioners. When John described himself, he didn’t give his birthdate or parents’ names. He didn’t talk about what jobs he had held or the places he had lived. John’s whole identity was bound up in the one he came to witness to. “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He was not the Messiah, nor a former prophet. He was not the light but he came to testify to the light.

Almost exactly 500 years ago, a German artist named Matthias Grunewald painted a series of paintings of the crucifixion. One of the best known of these pieces contains the image of John, clothed in animal skins. There is a lamb at his feet and in his left hand, he holds an open book. His right index finger is pointed at the figure of Jesus, hanging on the cross. When you see it, you realize that his finger is about twice as long as a normal finger would be. Behind John are some words in Latin, which translate, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Though the scene was painted 500 years after the officials questioned John, perhaps Grunewald gives the best answer to their questions. Who was John? He was someone who pointed to Jesus, who baptized in his name, who witnessed to the light. John took great pains to point out to those who listened to him and those who followed him that he was not Jesus, but that his whole reason for being was to lead others to Jesus, to point people to a way out of their despair, to lead people out of darkness into the light of day.

What a privilege it was for John to be chosen to bear witness to Jesus! John dedicated his whole life to that goal. Many didn’t understand John or his unique role; a lot of people, including those in charge in the church, were wary of him, but so many more came to know Jesus through his actions. It took a lot of courage for John to point the way to Jesus when others found him a threat to the status quo. John’s witness has been an example for many who have followed him. Some of us have been blessed to have such people in our lives – people who have told us about Jesus, who have placed the scriptures in our hands, who, through their lives, have pointed to Jesus as their truest identity. I give thanks for a mother who took me to church every week, who led me to the waters of baptism, who reminded me in her own faithfulness that I was first and foremost a child of God, loved by Jesus and invited to follow him. I’m grateful for friends and mentors who have pointed to Jesus to remind me that my call is to show others the path that leads to him. I’m humbled by a husband who is always looking for ways to live out his faith and who has taught and is teaching his daughter and me to do the same. I’m inspired by sisters and brothers in Christ who are dedicated to serving Jesus every single day, in the places you work and live and worship.

You and I are invited to take the place of John in Grunewald’s painting, to point to the cross, to point to an empty tomb, to repeat to ourselves and to all who will hear, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” “Who are you?” People are asking the question, you know. People who are struggling with their faith, struggling with their lives, are asking the church, “Who are you?” When our words and actions point to Jesus, they want to know that Jesus went to the cross for them and that his love includes them.

You and I, baptized by water and Spirit, are the Johns of our day. While each of us is an interesting individual with a unique history and personality, our truest identity is that of a voice that cries out in the wilderness, a witness to the light of Christ. This place in which we live, so beautiful it can leave us breathless, is a kind of wilderness for so many, both literally and figuratively. Many live here, around us, in the wilderness of poverty, for they are unable to provide safe and warm housing for their families or enough food to put on the table each day. Others wander, lost in the wilderness of sadness, loneliness or addiction. Some come here to escape painful reminders of their pasts but find that the memories persist in this new place. Some feel their lives lack meaning or direction. And they look at us and ask, “Who are you?” How we answer makes a big difference to those who ask. Do you and I have the courage to point to Jesus, to say that we follow him, that in him we find meaning and hope in our own lives and we live to share what we have with others? Are we faithful to Jesus’ example of grace and compassion and arms open wide to everyone? Are we sufficiently humble to truly believe that our sense of our own importance must decrease as our Lord gains power over us and the world? Can we live as the psalmist suggests, walking together in the wilderness while pointing to what God has done for us and is yet to do? Is it possible for us to go forward with, as the psalmist says, mouths filled with laughter and tongues with sounds of joy?

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The psalmist isn't naive. He doesn't ignore the brutal realities of our human condition. His poem is based in national disaster and lost fortunes; it laments people who had been banished into captivity. As David Lose puts it, “We "sow in tears" and "go out weeping," but nevertheless dream of laughter and joy.” We may fear the darkness that at times threatens to envelop us all, but we know that those who dwell in deepest darkest will at last see the light the darkness cannot overcome.

Who are you and I? Paul tells us we are children of God, rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. And this is the will of God for all we encounter and know and meet, for Christ’s mercy and grace know no limits and include all who watch us as we boldly point to our God.

Amen.

Advent 3B

December 14, 2014

Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish

John 1:6-8, 19-28