



Sermon of December 12, 1999



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"HE'S HERE SOMEWHERE"

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

To understand the gospels you must remember that they were written some generations after the Resurrection, and written to answer the questions being raised in that generation. In the case of the Gospel of John, which is the lesson for the sermon this morning, it was written at least sixty years after the Resurrection, three or four generations after. So the question being asked in our text is, "Where is he?" "If he has been resurrected, then where is he?"

It is a particularly critical question for that generation, because the earlier generations had all believed that he has been "ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

"So where is he?" Paul said his return would be on a cloud in glory in this generation. "So where

is he?"

John uses the scene that you heard read to you this morning to answer that question, the scene with John the Baptist. And he does it ingeniously.

In all of the gospels, John the Baptist is the one who is called to "prepare the way of the Lord," the "voice crying in the wilderness." He is the one who is appointed by God to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. In the other gospels the way he does that is to cry, "Repent; for the Kingdom of God is at hand." But in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist has a different role. He is not here for preparation, he's here for interrogation. He's used as an expert witness.

The word came to the authorities that people are saying that the Messiah has come. So the authorities, they are identified as Levites and priests from Jerusalem, go down to the River Jordan, to where John is baptizing, to question John, because he is the logical candidate. He is enormously popular. He's obviously righteous. He's a natural leader, the most respected person in the country. He's the kind of person who God would undoubtedly choose to be the leader of the nation, and to lead some uprising that would throw the Roman oppressors out of the country and inaugurate the Kingdom of God. It's got to be John.

So they go down to the River Jordan where John the Baptist is baptizing, and ask him outright, "Who are you?" And John, who evidently knew that they were coming, and what they would ask, replied, "I am not the Messiah."

The priests and the Levites then asked the next logical question, "Are you Elijah?" Elijah was expected to return at the inauguration of the Kingdom. He says, "No. I am not Elijah."

"Then are you the prophet?" That was one of the titles for Moses, who was another celebrity expected to return at the time of the Kingdom. John answers, "No. I am not the prophet."

So they ask, "Then who are you?" He answered, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord."

The delegation then says, "Look, we were sent by the Pharisees." Which is supposed to put some fear into John, to impress him so that he will answer the questions the way they want him to answer. They continue, "Why are you baptizing if you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet? He answers, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

They thought it had to be John. I mean, who else could it be? There were no trumpet fanfares, no celestial signs pointing to somebody. They had to find out on their own. It had to be John. He is the logical one. But John says, "It's not me. But he's here among you as one that you do not know."

That answered the question for the delegation from Jerusalem, but more importantly it answered the Church's question in the third generation. "Where is he?" "He is here among you as one that you do not know."

Also in the Gospel of John it says he went to his own people, and his own people did not know him. It says that he went to his disciples, and the disciples were confused. Jesus says to Philip, "Have I been with you so long that you don't even know who I am." Later, he says, that you will see me, then you won't see me, then in a little while you will see me. It sounds like hide-and-go-seek. Now you see me, now you don't.

What is being revealed to us here in the 1st chapter of John is God's *modus operandi*. This is the way God works in the world. "He is among you as one you do not know."

And we are reminded of that by Christmas. Christmas is the story of how God entered our world. It was in a remote corner of the Empire, in some backwater town. The way Chechnya is to Moscow, is the way Palestine was to Rome. Just a nuisance on the periphery of the Empire, something they could get rid of simply by military action.

If you wanted people to pay attention, then you would do it in Rome. You would do it in the capital of the Empire, not in Palestine, and certainly not in Nazareth, which is where the angel found Mary, and said, "Blessed are you among all the women of the world."

But I would guess that if you wanted to keep it quiet, you would do it in Nazareth, in Galilee. You notice what it says in Luke's wonderful story of the birth of Jesus? After the announcement to her by the angel, it says Mary tells only one person, her cousin, Elizabeth.

Oh, she must have told Joseph. Though Luke, at any rate, says that he didn't say anything. He was dumbfounded, he didn't know what to say. And then after the birth, after the shepherds visit, these wonderful words. "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." That means she didn't tell anybody. "He is among you as one you do not know."

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him,
Still the dear Christ enters in.

Which is the message of another story in Luke, the walk to Emmaus. Two men walking down the road to Emmaus, the day after the Resurrection. They do not know that Jesus has been resurrected. They are joined by a third man, a stranger. They walk, the three of them. As they walk, they talk, conversing as they go along the road. They come to an inn. The two men invite the third man, the stranger, to have a meal with them. They sit at table. The stranger takes the bread and breaks it. They say, "It's him!" They swear to it. "It's him!" "The Lord is with us!" They rush to tell the disciples, "He is with us!"

Could it be that he is among us as one unknown, until we practice hospitality to a stranger? Remember Abraham and Sarah, back in the Old Testament, extending hospitality to three strangers on the desert. They arrive at their tent. Abraham invites them in. Sarah prepares a

meal for them. And while they are eating, they discover that the three men are angels.

The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament reminds us of that incident, and counsels Christians to make hospitality a Christian virtue. "For you may be entertaining angels unaware." But more than that, you may be doing it to Christ, who said, "If you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

Tom Long teaches at the seminary at Princeton. But for a while he lived in Atlanta, and attended a Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta. Like most downtown churches, it has to cope with the problem of the homeless. So they opened up their gymnasium in the winter as a shelter. It was the practice of that church, as it is in this church when we open our buildings as a shelter in the winter months, to have people from the church serve as hosts and hostesses.

Long volunteered to be a host one night. The night came and since no one else volunteered, he invited a friend to come and join him. His friend was not a member of that church. In fact, he wasn't a member of any church. But periodically, in their conversations about religious matters, this friend would say, "Tom, I'm not a theologian, but it seems to me....," and then he would express his opinion.

On this night as they were hosting the shelter, they met the men as they arrived, saw that they had something to eat, hung out with them for a while. Then as the men began to prepare to retire, Tom's friend said, "Tom, you get some sleep. I will stay with them the first watch, then I'll wake you up, and you can come and stay with them for the rest of the night."

So the friend stayed up and mingled with the guests, listened to them, asked questions about who they were, what had happened to them in their lives that they were now homeless. At 2:00 a.m. he went in and woke up Tom. He said, "Wake up! Wake up! I want you to come and see this. Granted I am no theologian, but I think that Jesus is down there."1

It was promised. "Those who show hospitality to the least of these," he said, "have done it to me."

We have all missed it. And I imagine we have missed it because we assumed that he was going to come on a cloud, with trumpets blaring. We would look up, and there he is. It will all be over. Especially during this millennial fever. That's what I hear all the time. I read in the paper the other day that four out of every ten Americans believe that they will see the end of history. They think it is coming in their lifetime. In part because of the movies, I am sure of that. The movies are filled with apocalyptic plots. I have never known a time when there is so many movies that dealt with the end of the world. Everyone with their eyes lifted up to the heavens, expecting something cataclysmic to happen.

But with Christmas coming just a few days before the end of the millennium, we ought to be able to see "how silently the wondrous gift is given." He will return in glory someday. We believe that. But right now "he stands among you as one you do not know." Which means that he is not absent from us. His spirit is here, working in and through events, and especially through the encounters that we have with other people.

Martin Luther talked about the priesthood of all believers. It was one of the pillars of the Reformation. Those of us who were raised in the Reformation tradition were taught that means that we don't need a priest as a mediator. We can be our own priest. We can speak and pray directly to God. But there is more than that in the term "priesthood of all believers." It also means that we are to be priests to our neighbors. Which meant that Luther believed that though you don't need a mediator to get to God, God needs you to get to someone else.

I know a woman whose life had gone flat for her. She suffered terrible fits of despair from time to time. Finally under doctor's care she was hospitalized, from which there was some improvement, but not enough for her. This had gone on for years, and she wanted it to end. She hoped for more. So one day on a whim, though perhaps she was led, she got a pass from the hospital, drove to the nearest United Methodist Church, and looked for the pastor.

It was a country church, just a tiny, unremarkable place. The kind of place that ministers, at appointment time at the Annual Conference, kid one another by saying, "Hey, I hear you were appointed to...," and they would name that place.

The man who was there, we all agreed, was in the right place, this unremarkable place, something like Nazareth, when you come to think about it. A place people never thought about. And the pastor himself was what you would term unremarkable. Not the kind of pastor that a city or a suburban church would want.

But this woman, sophisticated, talented, intelligent, came to him. They talked briefly. She told him her need. She asked for communion. He administered it, clumsily I would imagine. And something happened. She got better, and she stayed better. She said it was a miracle. She said it happened because this humble man opened his heart to her, and then served her the symbols of the presence of our Lord with us. And then he prayed for her.

Who would have imagined? But, "He stands among you as one you do not know."

Dan Burton publishes wonderful church music, and he writes equally wonderful poetry, though to my knowledge it is not published, except when I quote it in sermons, which I am about to do. He has shared some of his poetry with me, and one of those poems I want to use in closing. It is such a beautiful poem, entitled, "God Never Spoke to Me."

God never spoke to me
 Not once, ever,
 And surely I listened --
 To Prophets
 Musicians
 Children
 Philosophers
 All reciting enlightenment and rebirth.

I listened to Earth
 Sensual, joyous Earth,
 Green, blue

Flowing, climbing
Glorious Earth
But her answers pleased the moment, not the soul.

Then there were truth and his lover, beauty,
Long since known as one,
And the two/one fulfilled me as nothing else
The ecstasy of the search nearly surpassing
The joy of discovery;
But strength for the chase often eludes me,
And I settle in the embarrassed admission
Of my own inadequacy.
But today --
Today God sang to me
In the love of a friend;
Clearly he sang to me
Of trust and need
Of sharing and hope
Of life and creation.

And with heart suspended
I listened
To music beyond music
And love beyond love.

This is Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas. So we turn again to John the Baptist, who knows Jesus better than anyone. John says, "He stands among you as one you do not know." So expect him to be anywhere: in the stranger, in the poor whom you serve in his name, and in the friend.

1 From Bill Ritter

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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