

**The Third Sunday in Advent**  
**December 10-11, 2011**  
**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

*“Who Are You?”*

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent, and we’re steadily moving toward the culmination of this season: the celebration of the Lord’s coming – not just Jesus’ first Advent at Christmas, his birth in Bethlehem, but his yet-to-be-revealed second Advent when He will come again to judge the world in righteousness. The Third Sunday in Advent is sometimes called by its Latin name: *Gaudete Sunday*, “gaudete” meaning “rejoice.” The solemn call to Advent repentance and preparation for the Lord’s coming is tempered by this invitation to rejoice. In today’s Scripture lessons, we hear about God’s call to rejoice – not just superficial and fleeting rejoicing in all of the tinsel and trappings of this holiday season, but a rejoicing that goes much deeper. In the Old Testament lesson, God speaks of a future filled with good news for his displaced people. Through the prophet, Isaiah, we learn here the true source of rejoicing: **“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness”** (Isaiah 61:10). In the Epistle lesson, Paul calls believers to **“rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances”** (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). He concludes with a blessing that Christ’s people may be kept **“blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Thessalonians 5:24). But that rejoicing seems noticeably absent in the Gospel lesson. John the Baptist is questioned by the priests and Levites sent by the Pharisees about who he is, where he comes from, why he is baptizing, and what all of this means. He points them to that One who would come after him. John **“was not the light, came to bear witness about the light”** (John 1:8). And so on this Third Sunday in Advent, rejoicing in the salvation of our God, the message will focus on that question asked of John by the religious leaders: **“Who are you?”** (John 1:19). May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

It can be unsettling not knowing the identity of another person, especially someone who seems to be exerting a great deal of influence in our life. We don’t know how the priests and Levites asked their question of John – what their inflection and tone of voice was. Maybe it was, “*Who* are you?” Or maybe it was, “Who *are* you?” Or maybe it was, “Who are *you*?” Behind their question is a whole bunch of other questions, all dealing with power and control: Who sent you? What are your credentials? Where do you get the authority to do what you’re doing? Why are you doing all of this? Behind all of these questions is fear – fear that somehow John will take away their power and control; that he will undermine them and what they are doing. When someone asks us that question, “Who are you?”, these same underlying questions may well be the subtext.

John is confident in his own identity. He knows who he is, and he knows full well why he is doing what he is doing. He freely admits that he is not the promised and anointed Messiah, nor is he Elijah, nor the Prophet who were to precede the coming of the Messiah. He simply quotes the words of Isaiah: **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’... I baptize you with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”** (John 1:23, 26-27). Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus makes clear that

John, in fact, is Elijah, come to prepare the people for the Lord's coming (Matthew 17:10-13). John rejoiced in his coming, and we should also.

People are asking that basic question about Jesus today: "Who are you?" I believe people are genuinely interested in finding out who Jesus really and truly is. We are in a unique position to help them discover who Jesus really and truly is. Many are asking: Is Jesus merely a great teacher? Is He just a moral example from ages past? Is He only a mortal man who, like others in the span of history, lived and died, and whose memory lives on? Who are you, Jesus? If that's all there is to Jesus' identity – great teacher, moral example, mortal man, then why are we here? If that's all there is to Jesus' identity, then we are wasting our time. The truth of who Jesus is comes from the Word of God; the written Word reveals to us the living Word, the Word made flesh. Jesus is the only Son of God, true God and true Man, born of Mary, who lived a perfect life of service and died the death we deserve. He entered into our broken and shattered world to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our place and offered his life in our behalf, paying the penalty of our sin. He did all of this, not because we are worthy or deserving of what He did. He did all of this for love's sake, out of his great mercy. Who are you, Jesus? Jesus is the One who fulfills the words of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus is the One who has come **"to bring good news to the poor... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion – to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified"** (Isaiah 61:1-3).

My friends, we have the great privilege of telling the world about who Jesus is. Especially in this holy season leading up to the celebration of his birth, people are especially open to hearing about Jesus. They are especially open to an invitation to come to special events and worship services. So, when is the last time you invited someone to come with you to church? You have called me to be your pastor, and pastor literally means "shepherd." But the shepherd does not give birth to sheep; only sheep can give birth to sheep. I lay before you a challenge, that in these two weeks before Christmas each one of you identify, pray for, and then invite someone who has no church home to come with you to church. After all, good news should be shared. Rejoicing that we know who Jesus is, we want the world to know who Jesus is. Amen.