

The Third Sunday in Advent
December 10-11, 2016
Matthew 11:2-15

“Family Life: Who Do You Look Like?”

By its very nature, family life means that family members often resemble one another, but not always. In blended families or adoptive families, children might not necessarily look like mom or dad. But even if there isn't that family resemblance, they are just as much part of the family and loved just as much. I have learned by trial and error that it is very important to get the permission of family members before I go off telling stories about them up in the pulpit. It's one thing to tell stories about myself, and it's quite another to tell stories about others in my family. And so that is what I did with my wife in the story I am about to tell; it's not really a story at all, but an observation. Many of you know my wife, June, but you may not know that she has two sisters. All three of these sisters bear a strong resemblance to each other, something that people often comment on when they first meet them. It usually goes something like this: “Wow, you really look alike!” And then when they meet June's mom (who was just out here with June's dad at Thanksgiving), they say something like: “Oh, now I see where you get that family resemblance!” So, in your family life who do you look like? Is there a family resemblance that spans the generations? Sometimes we may have to go back a couple of generations to find someone in the family tree with our features, and thus we figure out, “Hey, I've got dad's eyes and mom's nose.” But we may have to go back farther to see that I've got grandma's ears and great-grandpa's cowlick in my hair. “Family Life” is the theme for our preaching series in this season of Advent, and today on the Third Sunday in Advent we focus on Jesus' words in the Gospel lesson under the theme, “Who Do You Look Like?” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

Last Sunday, we heard about that fiery figure, John the Baptist, who called the people of his day to repentance before the coming of the Lord. Once again today, we hear about John, but this time he's not out preaching to the crowds on the banks of the River Jordan. Rather, he is shut up in prison. Why? A few chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, we discover that John is actually executed by Herod for speaking out against Herod's unlawful marriage to his brother's wife (Matthew 14:1-12). Before this happens and while he's still imprisoned, John sends word by his disciples to Jesus. He's got to know if Jesus is the real deal or not: “**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**” (Matthew 11:3). He wants to know if Jesus really and truly is that promised Messiah whose coming was long foretold. Jesus' reply echoes the scope of his life and ministry, fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 35:1-10): “**Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.**” This is exactly what Jesus came to do as the Son of God: to restore life to God's original plan and purpose. Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). But Jesus goes beyond what Isaiah recorded! As unbelievable as it is to restore sight and hearing and speech, to give mobility to someone who is physically disabled, it's even more incredible to raise the dead! All this Jesus has done, all the while preaching good news to poor sinners such as you and me. The good news is that the Lord God has come near to us, not to curse and condemn, but to forgive and love. This is still the gift that Jesus brings to us today.

The family was confused, we are told. The family of God's people were perplexed and confused about John the Baptist. After all, it had been some 400 years since there had been any prophet whom God had raised up. To be sure, people were confused about Jesus also (Matthew 16:13ff.; Mark 8:27ff.; Luke 9:18ff.), and his true identity would only be revealed at his death and resurrection. We heard last week that John “**wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey**” (Matthew 3:4). He really looked like someone who was way down countless

generations in the family tree! In appearance and in message, he resembled Elijah of old, God's messenger. Within the family of faith, people needed clarification about John: who was he? Where did he come from? What was he all about? Jesus makes clear that John is that promised messenger who will precede the coming of the Lord. Jesus quotes from the final book of the Old Testament, Malachi, which literally means, "my messenger": **"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me"** (Malachi 3:1). And then Jesus goes one step further, and explicitly identifies John the Baptist as the new Elijah, whose coming fulfills the final words of prophecy from the Old Testament: **"Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction"** (Malachi 4:5-6).

John may have looked like Elijah, but who do you look like? Not just your physical appearance, but who you are. People in the same family can closely resemble one another, but they can be worlds apart in spirit and temperament. It's what's in here – in your heart – that will overflow into what you say and do. Do we look like Jesus? Do our words and actions resemble his own? Do people see him in us? John the Baptist closed out the time of waiting that preceded the coming of Jesus. As the forerunner of Jesus, he was the bridge spanning the age of preparation that would give way to the time of fulfillment. Jesus tells us that no one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist, but **"the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is great then he"** (Matthew 11:11). That's you and me! We who have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, we who trust in this Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:129), though we may count ourselves as small and insignificant, are greater than John the Baptist. How's that for amazing?!

I sincerely believe that people are really ready to see Jesus, including lots of people who don't go to church or who follow other religions. People are really hungry to see and know Jesus. And how will they come to see and know him except through his people? If Jesus is the head of his Body, which is the church, by his grace alone you and I are members of his Body (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 5:30). We are the hands, and feet, and mouth of Jesus to bring Jesus to people in the world around us. This is our Advent calling as we wait and watch for the coming of the Lord. Joining Jesus on his mission isn't another program or the next new and shiny thing. It's what the Body of Christ does wherever we go, whatever we do! It is our mission, our calling in Christ, so that people may see and know Jesus through us. This is exactly what those Greeks wanted after Jesus entered into Jerusalem. They were outsiders, foreigners, to the family of faith that was Israel, and yet, here they came with their simple request to Philip: **"Sir, we wish to see Jesus"** (John 12:21). That's still the request that so many people have today, sometimes without their even knowing it. They may not come out and ask you straight up, but underneath, that is what they are looking for: Jesus.

In the midst of this season, when we are tugged in so many different directions and trying to do so many things, let us not lose sight of the One who is at the hearts of it all: Jesus. With Christ at the center, let us not lose sight of the people around us who are anxious to see Jesus. They're looking to see if we look like him! They want to see and know him. May the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us, bless us with that Christ-like family resemblance until Christ shall come again. Amen.