

Understand Your Role
December 17, 2023
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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! Third Sunday of Advent. Can you believe it?

I want to read a passage of Scripture from the Gospel according to John. I'll be reading two sections: chapter 1, verses 6-8 and verses 19-28. This is about John the Baptist.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he only came to witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

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

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the prophet?"

He answered, "No."

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

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

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

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

All this happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

May God bless the reading of the Word.

"Lead, follow, or get out of the way!" Most of us have heard that expression at some point or another, maybe with another adjective or two added. But as a leader of people, I can tell you, you very seldom have problems with people who lead; and you very seldom have problems with people who follow; and you very seldom have problems with people who get out of the way. The people you have problems with are those who don't lead, who don't follow, and who don't get out of the way! It is very important that you know your role in life, no matter what role that happens to be. It's important that I know my role as a husband. It's important that I know my role as a citizen. It is important that I know my role as a pastor. Whatever your role in life, it is important you know what that role is. During the season of Advent, we talk an awful lot about John the Baptist, because of his role in the kingdom of God. He knew his role was to prepare people to meet Jesus. He knew his role, and he filled it well. Today we're going to be exploring the question: What is your role? What is your role right here, right now, at this time in your life? Under these circumstances, in the kingdom of God, what is your role right now, this Advent? This is a question we should ask ourselves routinely. What is my role now? What is my role, given the circumstances of my life? What is my role, given the era of

my life now? What is my role? But right now, I want you to think about what is your role now, during this Advent.

I'm going to begin by saying something that you might not be expecting. Right now, it might be all about you. Right now, it might be all about you. You need to concentrate on you and what's going on in your life. And I want you to hear very clearly that, if that is the case, it's okay. It's okay. It may be that right now there are one or two or three or more people in your life that you need to concentrate on. And you need to help them; you need to focus on them; and you know that. And that's okay. What is your role? It might be the same as it has been for the last 120 years. (That's supposed to be funny. For this congregation, that's a possibility!) Unlike what the world tells us, we're not supposed to do everything. We don't have to do everything. God does not expect us to do everything, just to fill our role and do our part at this moment in our life, under the circumstances we find ourselves in. And they may be very different this year than they ever have been before. What's your role?

John knew his place in the kingdom. When John arrived on the scene, there had not been a prophetic voice in Israel for over 400 years. And when John arrived, he caused quite a stir. Some of you have been there. You have been in circumstances and situations, maybe in a church, maybe in your own personal life, where you didn't hear God speaking for a long, long time. And when you finally heard it again, it was like a cold drink of water when you're dying of thirst. John caused quite a stir and, as a result of that, people tried to make him Messiah, tried to give him the top spot, which he denied. And in fact, people became disciples of John, so much so that years later, during the time of the Apostle Paul, Paul ran into a group of people who were disciples of John the Baptist and knew nothing of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John (a different John) emphasizes John's role, John's place. He knew he was the messenger, not the Messiah.

Now in our passage, the Orthodox come out to question John. Now the Orthodox are the keepers of the truth, the guardians of the truth. And in fact, they thought they were the ones who defined what was truth. There were two groups: the Levites and the Pharisees. Now the Levites are the descendants of Aaron. They are of the tribe of Levi. In the ancient Jewish church and among the ancient Jews, you were not called into ministry, you were born into ministry. You had to be of the tribe of Levi to be a priest. John the Baptist's father was a guy by the name of Zechariah who was of the tribe of Levi, who was a priest, and who served in the temple. So, by birth, that means that John the Baptist was of the priestly line. And so, the Levites were coming out to check on one of their own. And believe me, John needed some checking on. He was a weird dude, and they were coming out to check on him. The other group were the Pharisees. Think of them as the Orthodox police. They wanted to make sure that John wasn't teaching anything heretical. After all, people were going out to John in droves, and they were coming out to check on what he was teaching. The Orthodox are always suspicious of anything unusual. (It occurred to me, while I was putting the sermon together, that very few institutions in the world, perhaps none in the world, resent or resist change more than the Church. That's an "Amen," or "Oh, me!" We are suspicious of anything new.)

And so, they went out and asked him a very simple question: "Who are you?" Actually, that's not the question they were asking. They would determine for themselves who he was. They wanted to know: Who did he think he was? "Are you Messiah?" He said, "I

am not." "Then are you Elijah?" Now, if you know your Scriptures, that sounds a little odd, because Elijah had been dead for a thousand years. But among the Jewish people, there was a legend that said that before Messiah came, Elijah would be raised from the dead. He would come back and prepare the way. And John said, "I am not Elijah." But there were also rumors that one of the other prophets might come back, maybe Isaiah, maybe Jeremiah. And they said, "So, are you one of the prophets?" He said, "I am not." And their response was, "You're not anybody famous then. Who are you?" Now, this is the Mars paraphrase of what John said. He said, "I'm nobody. I'm nobody. I'm a voice telling you to get ready for somebody. I am a voice calling in the desert, telling you to get ready for somebody, and that somebody is the King. Just a voice." John emphasized his role and not himself. He wanted people to forget him and see Jesus. How refreshing that would be, for just one day in our society, if we could forget Christmas and just see Jesus. Wouldn't it? He wanted people to forget him and just see Jesus. He said, "There's someone here among you. He is already here. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals." As John saw it, he had one mission. And that mission was to prepare people to meet Jesus.

So again, I come back to my question for you: What's your role? What's your task? John embraced his role to the point of living in the desert by himself eating grasshoppers. (I really wish you could have heard the comments I got from our kids. I had several that went, "Ew!" and a couple that went, "Mmm!" I won't tell you who was who.) What's your role? It may be that this Advent, right now, because of the circumstances of your life, because of what you are going through or what you have been through, because of where you're at right now, you need to concentrate on you. Maybe you need to heal. Maybe you need to rest. Maybe you need to reset. Maybe you need to define what the new normal is. And if you need to concentrate on you, I want you to hear me say that's okay. You concentrate on you. It may be that there are specific people in your life right now that you know that you know that you know that you need to concentrate on them. You need to help them through this season. You need to help them enjoy this season. Whatever your role, you are part of God's plan, just like John the Baptist was part of God's plan. What is your role at this point in your life, under these circumstances, at this time, here and now? If you fill your role, the blessings of this season can be yours.

Let's pray. Our roles change through the years. It may be very different this year than it was last year. It may be exactly the same. Discover your role, define your role, and fill it to the best of your ability during this Advent. Let's pray.

God, we are very grateful for Your witnesses that have come before us, that have so adequately filled their roles. Lord, help us to discover what our role is at this point in our lives and to fill it to the best of our ability. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.