

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020

Lectionary Year A: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Believe it or not, there was a time when your phone would ring (on a landline, of all things) and you wouldn't know who was calling or that person's number. It must've been in the Nineties when this revolutionary new technology known as "Caller I.D." appeared, which let you know who was calling or, at least, the number of the phone from which the call was being placed. Eventually, some telephone users got wise to that, though, and managed to get "unknown" or "restricted" to appear on our Caller I.D.s.

The popularity of Caller I.D. coincided with the proliferation of nuisance calls from telemarketers and automated systems where there wasn't a real human being on the other end at all. With Caller I.D., you could screen out such annoyances by not picking up your receiver. Why bother answering when you haven't the faintest idea of who the caller is?

By the time I got my first cell phone, it was a given that at least the number of the party calling would appear on the display. I recall, however, that their name did not; in order for that to happen, I had to enter their name and number into my contacts. And this was back when we used our cell phones to talk, unlike now!

But back before the days of Caller I.D., telemarketers, and nuisance calls, there were, apart from the occasional prank call, people who had simply mis-dialed. They wanted to reach Joe, and, given the obvious absence of a Joe in your household, you said, "I'm sorry; I believe you have the wrong number." And that was it. The only instance in which this could get bothersome is if your phone number was very close to that of a major business, so a little slip in dialing could be

that one digit separating you from Big Jim's Heavy Equipment. And, unless you had teenagers, your daily call volume was likely lower than Big Jim's.

In this morning's Gospel text, John the Baptist comes across as one not hesitant to say, "I'm sorry; I believe you have the wrong number." He denied both that he was the Messiah and that he was Elijah. But for him to arouse that level of speculation indicates that his arrival wasn't exactly subtle. No, it was dramatic and fiery. Still, though, he was clear about his identity -- about both who he was and who he wasn't. That wasn't something to come up as "unknown" or "restricted" information.

We know, too, that identity is of life and death importance. If a court of law determines the wrong person to be guilty of murder and sentences him or her to death, what can be done about this miscarriage of justice after the person has been executed? Nothing. In the world of medicine, there are similar examples of, say, a doctor amputating the wrong leg. Absolute clarity with regard to identity prevents bad things from happening. Had John the Baptist answered the priests and Levites ambiguously, this very easily could've stirred up doubt and uncertainty, especially when the Messiah finally arrived.

Looking at this morning's text, we might say that John the Baptist's Caller I.D. would read "Isaiah 40:3." His answer to the priests and Levites was a direct quote of the prophet: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" The preparing that John the Baptist did was that of calling people to repentance and baptizing. It was an all-out, get-your-house-in-order, the-Messiah-is-coming kind of preparing. And, of course, we're dealing with a completely different frame of reference as to whose way is being prepared here; the text calls us to prepare for the adult Jesus of Nazareth while the liturgical season, at least in part, has us preparing for the Babe of Bethlehem.

But they're both the same person, so that shouldn't matter too greatly.

What matters is not whether a full-grown man or a tiny baby is on his way, but rather how our hearts and minds are prepared to receive Christ. Again, we hear Isaiah's call repeated by John the Baptist: "Make straight the way of the Lord." Identify yourself, your needs, your worries, and your afflictions, and call upon God for forgiveness and renewal. And -- guess what -- God will not screen out your call when he sees your name. No, God will, in accordance with the Gospel's promise, remove the burden and barrier of sin that weighed you down and prevented you from enjoying a right relationship with him. What better way is there of preparing the way?

Think, too, of John the Baptist's integrity. It took integrity to flat-out say, "I am not the one." A person of lesser constitution of character might've taken the notoriety surrounding the stir and ran with it. But, no, John the Baptist did exactly the opposite, going so far as to say: "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal" (John 1:26b-27). I would point out that untying the thong of a person's sandal was, in this time, a slave's task, and for John the Baptist to say that he wasn't worthy to do this for Jesus surely ought to agree with his declaration of "I am not the one."

My Dad once told me a story about two brothers who worked seasonally at American Crystal Sugar Company in Drayton, North Dakota back in the early Seventies; Dad would've been a chemist there at the time. One afternoon, North Dakota was pounded by one of its infamous winter storms, with blizzard conditions and (often) zero visibility. And by "zero visibility" we mean that you can barely see ten feet in front of you were you walking down a road, especially in open country. Dad was at work, but our house was in town, just a short drive from the factory

(and even employees who lived in town weren't showing up for work). By the time second shift approached, these two brothers showed up at about 2:30 in the afternoon for work. They had driven -- in blizzard conditions -- from Osnabrock, North Dakota to Drayton, North Dakota; that is a distance of approximately fifty miles, which they traveled regularly as Osnabrock was their residence.

But in those conditions?

Yes, indeed. My Dad was, needless to say, very surprised to see them there. Understandably, he asked, "How did you do it?" One of them said, "Well, one of us would walk on the road alongside the car and point the way while the other drove. And we took turns." In order to make it the fifty miles from Osnabrock to Drayton, they had to have left around eight in the morning!

I realize that being a reliable employee is a good thing, but I think what they did was a bit extreme and quite dangerous...

They were young then, though.

So who identifies the way and points the way? Who walks alongside us when there's zero visibility and shows us where to go? Surely, John the Baptist identifies the way; he knows who is the One to come and points to him. And, as should be evident by now, he helps us prepare the way. Pointing the way, or walking alongside us when our visibility has been obscured by sin, would be what Jesus does through the Holy Spirit. Even during Advent, we know that the One who is to come and the One for whom we prepare is already with us and has been for about two thousand years. He has already sent his promised Spirit to guide us in his physical absence. But in the already-but-not-yet cosmos of Christianity, we're continually waiting for Christ's Advent among us, whether as the Babe of Bethlehem or as the One who'll judge the living and the dead.

As for John the Baptist, he identifies the way, but he does not identify as the way. When we prepare the way, we are, in a different vein, preparing that channel to allow Christ to take away our sin and illumine our hearts with his light. And as our Gospel text reminds us, John the Baptist's place was not the same as Christ's; hear these words again: "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" (John 1:8). His Caller I.D. read "Isaiah 40:3," and if someone asked him if he was the Messiah, he'd say, "No. Sorry. Wrong number. But I can put you through to the One you want..."

And in the midst of crisis, anxiety, and pandemic, remember to identify yourself, your needs, your worries, and your afflictions before our merciful and compassionate God. He will always be there for forgiveness and renewal, and when he sees your name, he will surely answer your call. In that answer, there will be all the things that this season of Advent focuses on -- hope, renewal, a straight path, and Christ. Feel free to say, "I am not the one," and receive Jesus Christ, who is.

Amen.