

"One Whom You Do Not Know"
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – Dec. 13, 2020

PLEASE READ:
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8, 19-31

There is another crisis this year with the pandemic because it is not possible to have Santa welcoming a bunch of children on his lap. Santa as Super-spreader is not good for North Pole PR. I like what the Exchange Club is doing - a post office box with direct mail to the North Pole. Or, yesterday, after special negotiations with the North Pole, Santa showed up at Waveny House here in New Canaan... Santa is popular because he is the guy who will bring you what you want for Christmas. Whisper your heart's desires in his ear, and magically Christmas morning your presents appear...

I could not believe the lectionary texts have John the Baptist *again* as part of the gospel text. Really? Last week it was according to Mark, and today we have John the Baptist, *à la* gospel according to John. With the pandemic and political chaos going on, maybe this year the lectionary editors think we need an extra dose of the prophetic voice?

Today, we hear John's version of to *whom* and to *what* John's prophetic voice points: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him." John was not the light, the Gospel underlines, but he came to bear witness to the light. But here is what is fascinating to me: The other Gospels describe John the Baptist as a strange-sounding figure, foraging on locusts and wild honey, but in the Gospel of John, it is not John the Baptist who is the stranger; rather he points to another who is to us the real stranger: "I baptize with water," says John, "*but among you stands one whom you do not know.*"

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." John is referring, of course, to Jesus. What a curious thing to say! We know Jesus! He is the baby in the manger at the nativity scene! Our words tell us we know Jesus. He is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is "God of God, Light from Light, True God from True God," according to the Creed. "Jesus is the reason for the season," Christmas cards proclaim. Yes, we know Jesus. We carry him around with us - nothing strange about him. But still... the words of John the Baptist are haunting: "Among you stands one whom you do not know. . ."

Back in the 1920s, a man by the name of Bruce Barton wrote a book about Jesus entitled *The Man Nobody Knows*. It was a best seller and enormously influential, but as it turns out, "the man nobody knows" is a man everybody knows. As Barton explains him, Jesus is "the executive," "the outdoor man," "the sociable man." "He picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world." Jesus, as presented by Barton, is just like us, or if not like us, like our best and biggest dreams of success.

In W. H. Auden's, *For the Time Being*, it is King Herod, a thoroughly reasonable and ultimately practical man, who prays for a God he can recognize immediately. One who is not in the least extraordinary but *someone like himself*. Herod complains, "I asked for a God who should be as like me as possible. What use to me is a God whose divinity consists of doing difficult things that I cannot do or saying clever things that I cannot understand?"^[1]

But that is precisely the One whom John the Baptist will not "produce." The Baptist stands for all time, insistently interrupting our Christmas with the announcement, "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

Perhaps this Christmas we are more open to the mystery of Jesus, for this Christmas will hardly be familiar. For one, we will not have our families with us like we want. I am just getting used to the idea that we will not have our whole family together, and it really upsets me. It is the first time we will not be together. I am extremely disappointed. I had dreamed of welcoming all our kids to our new home and church family... Maybe another year... Christmas caroling at God's acre is canceled. I am so disappointed that we will not be singing together as a town around the Christmas tree...

New York Times journalist Kate Murphy says, "When there are discrepancies between expectations and reality, all kinds of distress signals go off in the brain. It doesn't matter if it's a holiday ritual or a more mundane habit like how you tie your shoes; if you can't do it the way you normally do it, you're biologically engineered to get upset!" She goes on to write, that the good news is that much of what we miss about our routines... has to do more with their comforting regularity than the actual behaviors..."[\[2\]](#)

So, I am wondering... Is there somehow a gift in this disruption, this interruption, this pandemical puncture of our familiar Christmas traditions? At least, maybe it is a reminder that we are apt to forget that the coming of the Messiah, God's promised one, is always surrounded by challenge and mystery.

Perhaps in these weeks of Advent, we are meant to remember that we cannot reduce the One who is coming, the very real Christ, into something we can grasp and hold and manage like any other year. The angels appearing to the shepherds and terrifying them but at the same time bringing tidings of a great joy remind us how strange this story is. The angels appear, singing in the dark, to usher us forever into the presence of someone vast and mysterious and a light that will blind us to everything before that dazzled and distracted us...

Jesus is so very different than our refined notions or doctrines of him may be. Jesus is the Living Word, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. He is the Anointed One! And although we know that He is present to us and loves us as we are, He is the One who also calls us forth to new and yet undiscovered life. His grace and love are a great mystery to us because it is so unlike ourselves to love the way he loves, to forgive the way he forgives, to seek out and care for those others have forgotten.

If we know Jesus at all, we know him as One who is much greater than our personal images of him. He is among us and yet far, far, beyond us. We know Jesus, and because we know Jesus, we know we do not know Jesus. The songs we sing express not only our tenderness but also our longing for his coming into our lives anew: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel..."

John the Baptist, you see, forces our attention to the awesome mystery of Jesus, the Son of God: "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

And deep down, isn't this what we really hope in these last weeks before Christmas? Beyond all the reasonable hopes and fears of all the years, we hope deep down that indeed Jesus Christ, the One who has come as a little baby, is also so much more than that? Isn't our greatest fear especially this year... the fear that Christmas is nothing more than the comforting rituals we

make for ourselves? We lug it up from the basement and unpack it and arrange and rearrange the figures and ornaments and then stow it all back again. Don't we hope that during it all that through what is familiar and known we might be invaded by wonder and mystery yet unknown?

John the Baptist's announcement is disturbing - but it is also glad tidings of great joy: among all that is so familiar, there is still more yet to be revealed, vastly more.

In the very midst of all that is so blessedly familiar, there is a blessing greater yet, one that we do not know and have not yet imagined.

Jesus comes as Isaiah describes him as one who will “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

This is the promise, and this is how Jesus came into the lives of people all around him... Remember the fishermen toiling by the sea, going along in life with work as best they could. Then they were invited to follow Jesus, and their lives took on eternal significance. No longer was joy wrapped around how many fish they could count in the net! Jesus entered people's homes and there was healing. There was a woman who touched Jesus' cloak and then ran away in shame, but Jesus surprised her by seeking her out and showing her challenging love. There was a beggar by the roadside who everyone else ignored, but Jesus sought him out because he cared about that single broken man. There was the woman by the well who was an outcast, with whom nobody else wanted to be seen, but Jesus talked to her of God's love. Jesus went out to those on whom everyone else had given up. He finds us when we think we are lost; he forgives us when we cannot even forgive ourselves; he comes to us when we think we are washed up. He calls us to new life when we feel like giving up. Jesus ordinarily comes into our lives in extraordinary ways. He truly is, *"God With Us."*

And this is the essential message which we must bring to our world in this season of Advent. We may be most faithful when we, like one alone crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord by surprising others with Christ's love and grace. And sometimes it looks like transformation, and sometimes it looks like consolation. He has come to bring good news to the poor... the poor and oppressed, and the poor in spirit. We prepare the way of the Lord by first receiving Mr. Light of the World by faith, and we prepare the way of the Lord by reflecting His light in our lives through patience, words of forgiveness and peace, encouragement and hope, deeds of kindness and selfless giving to people around us. We too can bear witness to the light in our dark world; we too can draw people to the one whom they do not yet know...

So, this Advent, we dare to wait and hope and look for the stranger coming among us. And if the unfamiliarity and strangeness of this particularly isolating and irritating pandemic-version of Christmas are not satisfying, maybe we will be more open to receiving the One who comes to us as one we do not know; but the One who comes with true healing in his wings, full of mystery and wonder, challenge, and surprise; a light that shines in the darkness, full of grace and truth, love, and great joy...

[1] W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Princeton U. Press, 2013), 56.

[2] Kate Murphy, “Pandemic-Proof Your Habbits,” (*New York Times*, November 28, 2020).