

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 14, 2008
Third Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm 126
I Thessalonians 5:12-28
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Years ago, musical artist Michael W. Smith had a famous song in which he sang:

*The wind is moving
But I am standing still
A life of pages
Waiting to be filled
A heart that's hopeful
A head that's full of dreams
But this becoming
Is harder than it seems
Feels like I'm*

*Looking for a reason
Roaming through the night to find
My place in this world
My place in this world
Not a lot to lean on
I need your light to help me find
My place in this world
My place in this world*

[words Michael W. Smith and Wayne Kirkpatrick]

He was not alone. For each of us, life can sometimes be like a Rubicks cube, filled with diverse colors and pieces. We twist and turn the pieces, this way and that, seeking desperately to find that perfect combination where every piece fits, where the colors match, where the puzzle is solved, where everything falls into

place. What a wonderful thing it can be when a person finds his or her purpose in life.

Every year at this time during Advent, we are introduced to this wildly colorful person of John the Baptist. He is one of those persons who makes us a little uncomfortable, perhaps because he is hard for us to figure out, and it is hard to pigeonhole him and fit him neatly into one of our stereotypes. He is unorthodox, and a little unpredictable.

But there is one thing we can say about John with certainty: *He had found his place in this world.* He had discovered his purpose in life. If all the world is indeed a stage, and you and I are merely players, John had discovered the unique role *he* was meant to play. It was not the lead, but rather, a supporting role. And to his credit, John was perfectly comfortable with that. A lesser man might have tried to be in charge, to be at the center, to force himself to the center of the spotlight. But not *this* man.

John knew *who* he was, and *what* he was put on this earth to do. *He was put on this earth to point people to Jesus.* He went to the people in wardrobe and got the most bizarre costume on the set. He got one of those frizzed-out, rainbow colored hairpieces, and a T-shirt that had the letters “John 3:16” on it. Then he put a sandwich board sign over himself that said, “Repent,” and he went out into the desert to the Jordan River. And at the Academy Awards that year, when it came

time to hand out the Oscar for “Best Supporting Actor in a Dramatic Role,” the winner was John the Baptist for his role in *Prepare the Way*.

John’s task of pointing people to Jesus, however, was made particularly difficult and challenging by virtue of something we are told in our text but which we might easily overlook.

In response to religious authorities who are questioning John about what he is doing, John responds to them with a very interesting detail in verse 26. He says, “I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not know who will soon begin his ministry. I am not worthy to be his slave.”

The NIV translates this, “among you stands one you do not know.”

The Amplified Bible renders it, “among you there stands One whom you do not recognize.”

Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translates: “a person you don’t recognize has taken his stand in your midst.”

Do you see the difficulty facing John at this point? In order to point at something effectively, it is usually helpful if whatever we’re pointing at stands out in some way, or is distinct from other things around it.

John has been given the role of pointing people to the lead actor in the play, but in this case the lead in the play is merely one of many nondescript faces in the

crowd! He has not yet begun his public ministry! His first miracle of turning water into wine is still out ahead of him at Cana.

God in the flesh is present. In the words of Charles Wesley, “God is contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.” But how do you point to someone who stands among you *incognito*? How do you point to someone who is quietly present in your midst, but not easily recognizable?

That is John’s task. And here as we find ourselves more than halfway through this Advent season, the season where we are called on to prepare for his coming, I want to say something to you that has the potential to make the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

Think back about your activities and duties and actions this past week. Recall some of the places you went, some of the things you did, some of the people you encountered. Recall the busy schedule, the appointments, the constraints and pressures of time.

As you think about your week, know this: it is very likely that in one of those places, and behind one of those faces..... you encountered Jesus. There, in the midst of your life that was preoccupied by a hundred different things, was the Godhead veiled in flesh that you did *not* see. But the important thing is not that you didn’t recognize him, but that he was there. He was present *to* you and *with* you through the lives of others who were pointing in his direction.

You may have noticed that Sheila lit the pink candle today at the beginning of the service. The pink candle represents joy, and this third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called *Gaudete* Sunday, from the French word that means “rejoice.” It is a time when we focus on the joy that Jesus’ coming brings, both to the world and to our lives.

You say, “pastor, what does this emphasis on joy have to do with our Scripture lessons and sermon this morning?”

Let’s answer that by returning to John the Baptist and Michael W. Smith. I’m 46 years old, and I’ve spent a good bit of my time on earth trying to find my place on this earth, even before I knew of Michael W. Smith’s ballad. I’d like to think I’ve learned a few things along the way.

But foremost among the things I’ve discovered is this: *the secret to true joy in life is found in our learning to point others to Jesus.* True joy is found when we mount life’s stage and accept a supporting role. And in our supporting role, we are not usually in the spotlight. Most of us are ordinary, nondescript, average folks. We are just another face in someone else’s crowd. But unbeknownst to them, when they look at us, a grace is at work that shifts their gaze from us to Jesus.

We don't need to don a wig and put on a sandwich board sign and position ourselves on a downtown street corner for this to happen. We simply need to accept our supporting role, and to be who God made us:

- * teachers
- * homemakers
- * business owners
- * photographers
- * attorneys
- * accountants
- * historians
- * engineers
- * librarians
- * students
- * computer specialists
- * musicians
- * retired executives
- * parents and grandparents
- * information technology specialists
- * prisoners
- * widows and widowers.....

.....all of whom are learning to point in the general direction of the One who comes to us in this holy season.

As we come to the table of the Lord, let us come with hearts full of joy and good cheer. For he stands in our midst through these symbols of bread and wine, which also point the way to him. As we receive the grace he offers, let us depart as those who would grace the lives of others, and point the way to his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.