

Advent 03 B 2017  
December 17, 2017 :: John 1: 6-8, 19-28  
Fr. Jim Cook

## “*Why Me? Why Not Me?*”

For nine of the 18 years that I was a parish priest in the Diocese of Kansas, I was also a member of the diocesan Commission on Ministry. And our job was to interview people who were in a discernment process that might (or might not) lead to their ordination as Priests or Deacons. It’s a process *all* ordained persons have to go through.

And a common theme I observed in almost all of the people we interviewed, was, on the one hand, feeling *certain* that God had called them to ordained ministry; while, on the other hand, feeling *uncertain* about why God had called *them*. And those we had interviewed almost always said something like this:

“*I know* it’s God calling me to do this; I just don’t know why God is calling *me* to do this. Who am I? Why am I so special? What can I bring to the table?”

But it's not just people who are thinking about ordination who are asking these questions. I've been working in parish ministry for over 28 years. And what I've observed throughout that time, is that your average person-in-the-pew, when presented with the chance to engage in a new ministry, or to participate in a leadership role, or whathave you, often asks the same question: "Why me? Who am I?"

And what all this means is that, within almost every parish, and within almost every parishioner, there is this tension between what we sense God may be calling us to do, at any given point in time, and our uncertainty or insecurity about being able to accomplish it. Now, it's with all this in mind that I turn our attention to today's gospel, where we are introduced to John the Baptist.

John was something of a (if you will) first-century version of a mega-church pastor, except that his congregation met outdoors. And people were coming to him from all over, and his popularity and success eventually attracted the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

One day, these religious leaders came to John, and asked him: “Who are you?” The actual language is a bit vague, because they could have been asking:

“Who are you?” as in “What’s your name?”

or

“Who are you?” as in “What are you doing?”

or

“Who are you?” as in “By what or whose authority are you doing these things?”

Now, if anyone had good reason to be confident of who he was, and of what he was doing, and of the authority by which he was doing it, it was John the Baptist. I’ll give you three reasons why.

First of all, John was likely a monk; scholars think that he was a member of the Essenes — which was a sect of Judaism, much like the Pharisees and Sadducees we read about in scripture.

And so, John lived a life devoted to the reading and studying of scripture, to the teaching scripture, and to preaching from the scriptures. So, he was a monk.

Second, he was a priest. His father, Zechariah, whom we encounter several times in the New Testament, was himself a priest. And so, John was part of a long and faithful tradition of Jewish priests.

And, third, John was a prophet. He was the first Jewish prophet to appear in a very long time, maybe three or four *hundred* years. And like all the Jewish prophets of old, John was courageous, and tough, and willing to speak truth to power.

So, when the religious leaders asked John “Who are you?” He could have pointed to any of these three reasons to justify himself. But John doesn’t do that. Instead, what he says is essentially this:

“I’m nothing, but someone who points people to God.”

In other words, John was an evangelist; and the thing is, we've all been called to be evangelists. But don't start fretting, because John shows us that effective evangelism is not about us.

It's not about what we know.

It's not about how many Bible verses we've memorized.

It's not even about how deep and firm is our faith.

In fact, all you need, to be an effective evangelist, is, when the odd occasion arises, is the willingness to talk about what *God* has done in your life. And that's it.

And contrary to popular belief, you don't have to be this perfect, ideal believer to do any of what I'm talking about, because the Bible is literally filled with examples of "unqualified people" who were effective at pointing others to God. For example:

There was Abraham, who harbored serious doubts about God, and God's promise to him.

There was Jacob, who was a cheat, and someone who struggled with everybody.

And then there was Joseph, who was this immature and arrogant teenager.

And who could forget Moses, whose story begins with him murdering someone, and ends with him being impatient with God.

Gideon was simply a coward, and a pagan idol-worshiper.

Samson was a womanizing drunk.

David was a power-abusing adulterer.

Solomon was this unwise wise man.

And Mary? Well, she was a very young Jewish girl, from a small village, in a remote corner of a great empire.

And so, if the Bible shows us anything, it's that there are so many more things you *don't* need to be someone who points people to God — to be an evangelist, in other words — than there are things you *do* need. And, in fact, it's often the case that the things we *think* we need usually just get in the way of being effective at pointing people to God.

And so, what does it look like to be someone who points people to God? Perhaps, something like this:

It's being willing to tell someone that, once, when I was lonely, God brought someone to me to keep me company;

Or, when I was afraid, God brought someone by to comfort me;

Or, when I felt lost, that God brought  
someone by to direct me.

In other words, it's taking to heart the promise of James 1:17 —  
that everything good in our lives is the gift of God — and being  
open to any opportunity to share that good news with others. And  
that's really what it's all about.

You know, the season of Advent is a really good time to  
remember that it's not so much that God is waiting for us to get  
busy and get on the ball, but rather that we're waiting for God.

We're waiting for God to make himself known  
to us.

We're waiting for God to make his presence  
felt to us.

We're waiting for God to encourage us, and  
strengthen us, and enable us to face whatever  
challenge befalls us, or to take advantage of  
whatever opportunity presents itself.

But Advent is also a really good time to remember that it is God's good pleasure to give us whatever it is that we might need, at any given moment, or for any given task.

So, please don't worry if you feel unqualified to be someone who points people to God; join the club. Don't worry if you think your life's a mess; welcome to the club. Honestly? I still sometimes struggle with doubt and uncertainty, even after 28 years of being an ordained minister.

And during this Advent season, it's also good to be reminded that it's not so much that *we* are waiting for God, but that we are waiting for *God*; and then, we're waiting for the opportunity to *tell* someone about it. And when that opportunity arises, and God-willing, we're not going to be asking "Why me?" but rather "Why not me?"

Amen.