

Message for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year B (12/13/2020)
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Angela Gorrell, professor of practical theology at Truett Theological Seminary, tells a revealing story about her classroom and our culture's conception of the self:

The college students sat quietly as they watched me write [a] personal branding expert[']s words on the board: "You are a brand and the success of your personal brand lies in your hands." I read the words aloud and asked the students to come to the board to write responses to [the] statement.... Their reflections, both on the board and in the discussion afterward, were fascinating. The students shared thoughtful criticisms of the statement, but no one actually disagreed with it. Eventually I said, "You know you're not actually a brand, right? You are a human being."¹

John the Baptizer could never have dreamed of the world in which we live today, a world of instant and far-reaching communication, overabundant consumer choices, and so-called personal branding. He could, however, comprehend the temptation to self-promotion. "Who are you?" the religious elite demand to know when they become aware of his ministry's success. Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah returned? Are you the prophet foretold? In other words, *What's your claim to fame? What sets you apart? What is your brand, and why should we care?*

It's his moment in the spotlight, a chance to boost his public image. But, John has no interest in asserting himself, only in pointing to another,

¹ *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape*, 55.

“the one who is coming after....” John’s is a negative confession: *Are you the Messiah? Elijah? The prophet?* “I am not,” he replies, a clear contrast to Jesus’ famous “I am” statements in this Gospel: “I am the bread of life”; “I am the light of the world”; “I am the good shepherd.”

In a world where our perceived value depends on the ways we distinguish ourselves, where “the success of your personal brand lies in your hands,” John’s deference to Jesus is refreshing. He doesn’t need to be the Messiah; he doesn’t need to be Elijah or the prophet; he doesn’t need to be the center of attention; he only needs to be who God intends him to be: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’.... I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” In fact, **it’s precisely John’s self-acceptance – his sense of security with regard to his particular gifts and calling and not his relative importance – that allows him to shine in the gospel story.**

John is wholly himself, and so he gives us permission to be ourselves, too, and to trust that we are enough. When you’re “confident of the love of God... rooted in [your] identity... and assured of a future that is in God’s hands,” as one interpreter insists², then you’re released from the pressure to bolster your reputation and feed your ego. *You’re not a brand; you are a human being.*

² David Lose, www.davidlose.net/2020/12/advent-3-b-joyful-sacrifice/.

What's more, by being ourselves, we're in the best position to pursue our chief purpose. If John is called "the Baptizer" in other Gospels, in this Gospel he's identified primarily as "a witness to testify to the light." "John the Witness," we might call him then, or "John the First Witness."³ The forerunner of Jesus stands as a model for those in every generation who seek to draw attention to "the light of the world," the Lord, the one who is "full of grace and truth." "[John] belongs entirely to Christ," renowned 20th-century theologian Karl Barth remarks, "he is only there to collect and give back the light that falls upon him from the figure of the one and only Christ."⁴

That's the privilege and assurance of discipleship, friends. If the pressure to stand out is compounded by the pressure to overachieve, John's example invites us to play a right-sized role in God's unfolding project to love and save the world. **Who you are is who God wants you to be; what you have to offer is what God needs.**

By way of conclusion, let me share with you a reflection often attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, and let it be an invitation to embrace your true identity and your place in the master plan:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,

³ Gary W. Charles, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 73.

⁴ Quoted by David L. Bartlett, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 68.

it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.⁵

⁵ [www.chausa.org/prayers/cha-prayer-library/prayer/in-memory-of-bishop-oscar-romero-\(1917-1980\).](http://www.chausa.org/prayers/cha-prayer-library/prayer/in-memory-of-bishop-oscar-romero-(1917-1980).)