

**Third Sunday of Advent, Year B**  
**December 17, 2017**  
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On this the third of four Sundays of Advent we are still hearing from John the Baptist. It's almost Christmas. What's he doing here?

That's what the investigators wanted to know-- the priests, Levites, and Pharisees sent from Jerusalem to see what all the excitement was bubbling around John the Baptist down at the Jordan River. Enthusiasm always concerns authority. And rightly so. A parent who hears a lot of commotion upstairs can't help but cock an ear for trouble. Authorities who are corrupt, whose perch at the top of the pyramid is made precarious by the resentment of the people, are especially alert. "Go find out what's going on."

Who are you?" In an unhappy age longing for a Messiah John knew what they meant, and answered, "I am not the Christ."

"Are you Elijah?". Elijah had been taken up alive into heaven by a chariot of fire, and the Book of the Prophet Malachi has a prediction that he would return. To quote Malachi: "Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day."

"Are you Elijah?" John answered, "I am not." (Mal. 3:23)

"Are you the prophet?". Moses, the great founding prophet of Judaism, through whom God gave the ten commandments and spoke to the people, once said that in the future God would raise up from among the Israelites a prophet like himself, to whom they must listen, and obey. (Dt. 18:15) People had come to expect that this "prophet like Moses" would appear in the end times, just as Moses had been raised up in the beginning times. "Are you the prophet?" John answered, "No".

John was not being very forthcoming, and the investigators began to lose their patience. "Who are you? What do you have to say for yourself? Don't make us look like fools before our superiors."

And the Pharisees chimed in, "Why do you baptize if you are not the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet?"

To answer them, John quoted the Prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert,, make straight the way of the Lord."

That may or may not have clarified things. In Isaiah, the voice crying out was proclaiming that God would be bringing the Jews back from exile in Babylon. The voice was saying, "Make a highway straight through the wilderness to hurry them home!" If John the Baptist was that voice again crying out, it must mean that that the Lord God was again

restoring Israel. But how?

They were already at home in their promised land. But perhaps John made his meaning clear with the tone of his voice, and a look, and a finger pointed at officialdom when he said, “make straight the way of the Lord!” You leaders, perched up there in Jerusalem on the temple mount, who have sent a delegation to investigate but have not yourselves come humbly down into the water with contrite hearts. ... You, make straight the way of the Lord!

In quoting Isaiah, John was explaining himself but even more issuing a call for personal conversion. Jesus also quoted from Isaiah to explain who he was and what he was doing. He did it in his hometown synagogue. “The Lord has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, that justice and praise may spring up before all the nations. “(Is. 61, Lk. 4:16 f)

John called the people to conversion that they might escape the coming wrath. Jesus assured them of the blessings their conversion would bring.

The investigators had not asked about Isaiah. They had asked about Elijah, and John denied it, which was no lie. He wasn't Elijah dropped off by that fiery chariot to usher in the day of the Lord. John had grown up in the hill country of Judah. His father was Zechariah. His mother was Elizabeth, a relative of Mary of Nazareth. John wasn't Elijah literally, but when the angel Gabriel had announced his birth to his father Zechariah, Gabriel described the boy's mission this way: “He will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers toward their children, and the disobedient to understanding, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.” (Lk. 1:17)

This was a reference to that passage in the Prophet Malachi about the future coming of Elijah. To quote that passage more fully: “Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with doom.”

How interesting. A land where parents and children abuse or neglect each other is doomed. How interesting that as we prepare to celebrate the birth of God as a little child into a human family, we should hear from Malachi about the importance of family relationships. Can the human family be healed if our immediate blood families are crippled or sick? How can we be a people fit for the Lord? There's no other way to start than by fathers and mothers turning their hearts to their children, and children turning their hearts to their parents.

How easy it is for spouses to regard each other as means to an end, for parents to see their children as dependents or even as problems, for children to treat their parents like suppliers

of their needs and obstacles to their desires. What John the Baptist is doing here on this third Sunday of Advent, Elijah returned to prepare a people fit for the Lord, is reminding us to turn our hearts to one another, to those people closest to us, most within our reach; relating to them not as means to an end but as ends in themselves, God's loved ones given into our care.

Isaiah, Elijah, and John cry out together, "Make straight the way of the Lord", a way that leads straight through your family.