

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout.”

The question, “who are you?” can seem so ordinary. You get asked that countless times in your and it’s one that doesn’t seem to require a great deal of thought and seems so innocuous. Where things get warped and complicated is when you forget the answer to that question doesn’t exist in yourselves rather it’s something which has been revealed and given to you.

Think about that for a second at its basic level. Your name was given to you by your parents. When I was in elementary school, I wasn’t a fan of the name Boyd but every first day of school it was brought up as the class roster was read. I didn’t choose that name, it wasn’t my decision, that’s the name my parents gave to me. Over time, though, I came to a different view and appreciate that name and what that means especially now that I gave that name to my son. He didn’t choose it, I as his father and Rebekah with me, gave him that name; that’s who he is.

All this goes along with what you heard a few minutes ago in the gospel reading. St. John the Evangelist recorded this scene with John the Baptist. He wrote, “This is the testimony [martyr] of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

Now one thing that may get missed here or at least overlooked is how this discussion happens. Typically, when someone asks a question in the Gospels the response to the question is “he answered.” The word, “answer” is used. Here, in the Gospel reading today, that’s not the case at first in this dialogue. John “confessed.” The word in Greek here entails something different than simply “answer.”

The Greek word for confess in its most literal sense means to “say/speak the same thing.” This word is used in connection with someone who has been given a message to say from someone else and then says what he has been given to say. In the church we use this word and concept in primarily two ways. The first is when we “confess our sins.” God’s law reveals that you have sinned against him, and you say back or confess that you have sinned against the Lord. You don’t determine what is or is not sinful, God does, and the confession of sin acknowledges this truth about what God reveals.

The second way confess is used is when you “confess the faith.” The Christian faith has been given to you, and God places it on your lips. When you confess the faith, you are saying back what God has revealed in the Scriptures. Just as you don’t determine what is or is not sin so too you don’t determine what the Christian faith is or is not. For example, St. Peter in Matthew 16 confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God and Jesus told him that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him rather it was the Father in heaven. Both meanings of confess, then, are outside of yourself so that even when you “confess your faith” you are speaking something that has been given to you and does not have its source and substance in you as an individual. Your confession speaks what God has said and revealed to you and given you the faith to know and trust this as your own.

Now, this may seem a bit academic or a maybe it’s a “well yeah of course, pastor.” True enough but see the significance of this is very practical. For John this meant the answer to the question asked of him which, in turn, would drive the rest of the whole discussion, “who are you?” wasn’t up to him. Listen again to this reading. “This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

God revealed to John who he was, and he confessed, he gave answer, accordingly. In this confession he was being faithful to God's word and had confidence to stand before these men sent by the ones who would later want Jesus dead. This was his testimony/witness/martyr. To know what God says about you means everything. In faith you confess it before God and men.

In the reading today, John the Baptist didn't decide who he was when people asked him. It wasn't up to him. His identity was given to him along his task and purpose. God spoke through the prophets pointing to his person and office. John was the voice. He was the voice crying out in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, that's what he was called by God to do. He wasn't the Christ; Jesus is the Christ.

John was faithful in his words. He confessed the faith as he told who he wasn't and then would tell of and point to Jesus. This is what a faithful confession of Jesus does. It rejects error and proclaims what is true. John was doing this in the reading. Even if he would have said "yes" to the questions they asked him it wouldn't have made it true, it would have just made either John or God a liar.

It's no different when it comes to many other things in life. You can't be something or someone you are not. And who you are is created by God and proclaimed by him. It goes back to God as the Creator. He is the one who creates life and what this life is created to be. The days of creation saw the various things of the universe come into being which we still see many of these things around us today. Animals, trees, oceans, land, sky, and so many other parts of creation have their source in the Lord who spoke them into being. He gave different kinds and all in an order to this creation. And finally, the pinnacle of creation, was man. God created Adam and from Adam God created woman, Eve.

Now, think about yourself. You're not standing on the banks of the Jordan River with a group of people sent to interrogate you, but the question is still asked of you in your life in various ways, "Who are you?" The answer to that question doesn't reside in yourself. Fundamentally, you don't define who you are, that's not yours to do. Sure, there are certain things where you do have a freedom like which sports teams to like, cars, and the like. But look at the lengths you are tempted to try to do this in your lives and in so many ways. How is it that you define who you are? The temptation is to define yourselves by your desires, wants, and what others may tell you is very real and all around you. This is the prevailing thought in the world today. Look simply how people speak about themselves and how they live this out.

It's in vogue today for people to define themselves by their sin. What a trick the devil has played on the world and shame on us when we believe the lie. God warned of this through the Prophet Isaiah when he said, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!" Again, in 2 Timothy he said, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

That is the testimony or witness of the devil, the world, and our fallen flesh. When confronted with God's revealing in a general way in creation and in the divine and saving way in the Scripture rather than confessing what God says they do not confess but deny. These find their identity in all sorts of ungodliness. Think about in the world today when people want to find their identity but whatever they deem right. A man thinking he is a woman or a woman thinking she is a man is absurd. These basic things of our identity have been totally thrown upside down. And then, to add insult to injury, we want to bring God into the mix and claim he is the source of our sinful lives saying that "God made me this way." God, however, is not the source of sin and God cannot be mocked. All these things are attempts to try and save ourselves apart from Christ and are evidence of sin and unbelief.

God calls his people to turn from that thinking which is idolatrous. In Ephesians he says, "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints." So, who are you? Don't

even let those things be named among you or on your lips, this is not to be the identity of saints. Don't use that language and redefining of terms, which is the first step in buying into the lies. It goes even just beyond the two sexes but other aspects of the world and reality. Your identity is far more important, and far more is at stake. John the Baptist knew who he was because he listened to the words of God. The word of God is preached to you today as well and calls you to be faithful and confess Christ and his word faithfully.

God hasn't called you to be John the Baptist or even a preacher of the word, but the Holy Spirit has given you a faith that confesses him before God and men. He calls you to be a voice in this world where the Lord has placed you in your vocations. It may sound like you are crying out the wilderness of the world, your friends, or even your own family yet the Lord still calls you to be faithful before all people. Jesus said, "So everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." This is why you must be students of God's word. You must be reading the Scriptures and studying them daily. You must be praying to God every day for wisdom according to his word and a courage to be faithfully confessing him in your words and life.

The Christian Church is at point in history, which she has been in for, where the world is not friendly to our confession. You are going to get asked increasingly, "who are you?" Perhaps this be worded more along the lines of "what do you believe" which for the Christian is the same question. Know too that God also attaches something to this word you have and which is confessed in the world, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." God's word has

John the Baptist was a great saint whose life serves as an example for you, "He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'" Later he said, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." He was unworthy to untie the strap of the sandal of the one who was to come because this one was the one prophesied throughout the Scriptures such as today's Old Testament reading, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen."

Although he was unworthy to untie the strap of his sandals this one, who came a long foretold, came with redemption. His identity was spoken of through the word and produced hope in what would come about when he stepped into the world. He came with grace and mercy to save and so he did. Jesus is the Christ. He is all those names you just sang in the Great "O" Antiphons included in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

As a Christian you do not cling to your sin and have that identify you. Confessing your sin, you place it onto Christ and his word says, "I forgive you." He covers you and you are now a new creation who abhors what is contrary to God. You rejoice instead in what the Lord gives and speaks. God makes you his own, he calls you his own, and you are his own. That's who you are this last Sunday of Advent and every day. God showers down upon you what Jesus has done for you. You are known by God on account of Jesus.

Behold this Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Your sin. Who are you? You are sons and daughters of the King who is Lamb of God pure and holy. You have been formed and knit together wonderfully in the wombs of your mothers. You have been born into this world as a child either as a little boy or little girl. You have been given a name which sets you apart. You have been baptized into Christ and the holy, saving name of God has been placed upon you and your sin was washed away, you were rescued from death and the devil, and given eternal salvation. You have been called by God to be children of your parents. For many you have been God by God to be either a husband or wife. If God has willed it even further, you have been called by God to be parents of your children. The answer to "who are you?" is one that keeps you going back to the Lord and his word. And while there may be different vocations in the estates of the family and society God tells you fundamentally and eternally who you are in your baptism.

Who are you? You are Christian. You are heir of eternal life. You are the church of God. You are saints. You are people who call God your Father because the Son has redeemed you by his blood. You fix your eyes on the one who never lies, always fulfills his promises, and guards and keeps you as his own. With St. Paul in Romans 3 you confess, “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, ‘That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.’” God is no liar and he says you are forgiven and have eternal life.

Looking to Jesus, the one who was promised, has come, is here now, and is coming again you see who you truly are and it’s to your salvation. What a real and lasting identity this truly is to be in Christ. God says through St. Paul in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” That’s the definition of your life, your identity. That’s who you are for the sake of Jesus crucified for you. That’s your baptismal identity. All those names of the “O Antiphons” are what has covered you and belong to you now as you have been clothed with Christ.

As a Christian, you have freedom to be who you really, truly are and this is a freedom to live. This is the life that lives as St. Paul wrote in the Epistle reading, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The Lord keeps you in his care in Christ and will not let you fall. This is reason to rejoice indeed and know who you are in Christ.

As a Christian you have a clear conscience before God which silences the devil, the world, and the fallen flesh. It’s a freeing thing to know that what God thinks of you is dependent upon Christ and that is never changing. John Baptist had this confidence because he knew he wasn’t the Christ, but the Christ is the Lamb of God who takes the way the sin of the world. This is Jesus who is the Resurrection and the Life so that when John was killed for his preaching he went to his death as one who has eternal life. Your life is a real life that is eternal. Not even death can take away who you are as a Christian. Sin brings about slavery and death, but Christ comes with healing and brings new life. He breaks the bonds and chains of sin, death, and the devil by his perfect life, suffering, and death. Jesus makes you his new creation even as he will make all things new on the Last Day. This is the confession too that God has placed upon your lips as his people in this world.

The last Sunday of Advent God’s people cry out, “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout.” With the same breath you know that Redemption has come in Jesus. He is your righteousness who showers you with his grace and covers you with the forgiveness of your sins which is eternal life. So, you go on. You press forward in this fallen world knowing that Lord is at hand. The day is coming when who you are will be even more fully known as all sin is gone, death is no more, and the devil is forever in hell with his people and demonic crew. But until that day you are still the Lord’s and he still is yours. Cling to his word. Cling to your baptism. Confess your sin and receive his absolution. Feast at his Supper taking into your mouths his true body and blood given and shed for you. And in all of this know with absolutely certainty who God has called you to be. You are a Christian. Looking to Christ, there’s no denying that. You are a saint, an heir of eternal life. That’s who you are now and forever.

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