

December 17, 2023 – John 1:6-8, 19-28

One of the oddest things about going to the Disney parks that my family and I so often visit is the characters. People, dressed up in costumes as animated characters, greeting you around the parks. Signing autograph books. Taking selfies. Sometimes having full conversations with you by weird sort of sign language.

I say it's odd, not because I dislike them, but because I actually really enjoy meeting them. And I never expected to. Rationally, I know these are just people in costumes. Actors, performing a role. And inside that suit, they may be completely different than the character they are impersonating. Minnie Mouse may be a short, balding guy with tattoos. Donald Duck may be a middle aged mother of 3. It's impossible to know.

But in the moment, when you first meet them, and they're waving their arms, so excited to see you. And they give you a big hug and compliment the shirt your wearing and suggest all sorts of silly photos to take with you. Well, its hard not to get sucked into the magic of it all. You want them to be real. And so they feel real.

And, from their perspective, I have to think they enjoy portraying these beloved characters. Because who wouldn't want to have children falling over themselves to meet you. To hear adoring fans saying, "I love you Mickey! I love you Goofy!" Even if they are just impersonating a fictional character, it's gotta feel pretty good.

This week, in our Gospel reading, we hear about someone who had the opportunity to be an impersonator: John the Baptist. This is the second time in two weeks that we've heard about John. The subject of the Gospel is the same, but the details are different. And the fact that the evangelists spend so much time talking about John and giving us these details should make us pay attention to this strange man.

And John was indeed a very strange man. As we heard last week, he wore clothing made of camel's hair, he had a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he didn't just look strange or act strange. He sounded strange too. He preached a message of repentance. And that meant speaking truth to power. Confronting people with their sins and telling them to stop it, because the Kingdom of Heaven was near.

Yes, John was indeed a strange man. But despite how strange he was, people wanted to meet him. Crowds of people flocked out to the Jordan to hear John speak. They were lining up to be baptized by him. He even had his own group of disciples who were devoted to him and his teaching.

And so, having become inexplicably popular, it's not surprising that the priests and Levites also wanted to meet him. But rather than come to him in repentance or to be baptized, these religious leaders had an important question for him: "*Who are you?*"

Which sounds like a simple enough question, but it's actually massively loaded. Because they are giving him the opportunity to claim divine power. To claim that God had sent him. That God had anointed him. They were giving him the opportunity to impersonate the Christ.

And I have to think it was tempting. I mean, yes, John was a good and faithful man of God. But he was still a sinful human being. And he was surrounded by crowds of people who were all wondering, "Is this guy the Christ? Is this guy the one who has been sent to lead God's people into a glorious new era?" And I really think they wanted it to be him. All he had to do was claim the title and everyone would believe it.

But that wasn't John's purpose. That wasn't his mission. In fact, it was the very opposite of his mission. And so, our text says that John was clear and emphatic in his answer. "*He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed.*" He was 100% honest with them. There was absolutely no mistaking him. "*I am not the Christ.*"

But they kept at it. They wanted it to be him. And so they asked him, "*Are you Elijah?*" If you'll recall, Elijah was swept up into heaven in a whirlwind. He never actually died. And many Jews then and even today believe that was because God was planning on sending Elijah back to earth one day. And so they thought, "OK, if you're not the Christ, then maybe God sent Elijah back to us. That would be almost as good as the Christ." But no, John refused to impersonate Elijah too. He told them, "*I am not [Elijah]!*"

But they kept at it. They wanted it to be him. And so they asked him yet again, "*Are you the Prophet?*" Who is "the Prophet?" We're not entirely sure. Usually, though, that title is a reference to one of two men: Moses or Isaiah. Two of the greatest men in Israel's history. They are convinced that John the Baptist is some great, faithful leader, resurrected to lead them. But John's answer to this question was the shortest one yet. He simply said, "No!"

John had every opportunity to impersonate someone one of the greatest figures in Scripture. The Christ. Elijah. Moses or Isaiah. Dressing up as one of these characters would have made him absolutely beloved in all of Judea and Galilee. Every Jew in the world would have rallied to him. He would have been the center of attention.

Would you have resisted that temptation? Jesus' disciples didn't. He actually caught them arguing about who was the greatest among them. They were begging him to sit at his side when he came into his kingdom, one on his right, one on his left. And when he prophesied his upcoming arrest and crucifixion, they wanted to go down in a blaze of glory.

But John the Baptist knew that wasn't the way of Christ. Though Jesus hadn't yet said the words, John knew, *"Whoever wants to become great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."*

John knew exactly who he was and what he was supposed to do. *"I am not the Christ... He [is the one] who comes after me,... the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* John wasn't going to impersonate Jesus. He wasn't going to impersonate Elijah or Moses or Isaiah. He wasn't going to impersonate anyone. He was going to be exactly who God called him to be.

You see, the beginning of our Gospel reading tells us in no uncertain terms that John had a mission. He was *"a man sent from God"* and *"he came as a witness."* A witness. That's an important word. It appears three times in our text. A witness doesn't speak about himself. If a lawyer puts me on the witness stand, he doesn't want to hear about me, he wants to hear about someone else. What they said. What they did.

John came *"to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him."* And John was happy being a witness to the light. He was content in pointing to Jesus. He had no desire to impersonate the Christ, because he knew just how small he was. Just how unworthy he was to even untie Jesus' sandals.

John had seen the light of Christ while he was still in his mother's womb. And that light made him leap for joy. But it also humbled him. As he would later say, he knew that Jesus had to increase, and he had to decrease.

John was not an impersonator. He had no interest in pretending to be what he was not. His finger was not pointing to himself, directing people to him, but instead, he pointed to Jesus and said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* Behold Jesus, not me. I came to prepare the way for him. He's the one who takes away your sins. Not me. I'm nothing. He's everything.

As we think about John the Baptist and his role of being a witness, pointing people to Jesus, I wonder: Who was like John in your life? Who directed you to Christ? Who pointed to Jesus and said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?"*

Maybe it was your mother or father, a grandparent or other family member, a teacher, a neighbor, a friend, a coworker. Whoever it was, they did a very humble thing. They pointed you to Jesus. They said, "Don't look at me. Look at him. I can't save you. I can't answer all your questions. I can't take away all your guilt and shame. He can. He has. He always will."

They gave you a great gift that day. And it's a gift you can give too. Because you can be John the Baptist to someone else. No, I'm not asking you to be an impersonator, to be a character that you're not. I'm just asking you to be what you are. You are a baptized and redeemed child of God, bearing witness to the light. Bearing witness to Jesus.

You are a voice in the wilderness of this world. A voice that speaks the Word of truth to the powers of sin, death, and the devil. A voice that calls to repentance, even when it makes you look kind of strange to do so. A voice that is making straight the way of the Lord.

Do for someone else what what was already done for you. Point people to Jesus. Tell someone that he's coming. And tell someone that the One who's coming is not an impersonator. He is not a fictional character. He is the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is a Light that shines in the darkness, that all may see and be saved. Amen.