

Pastor T.C. Arnold
4th Sunday in Advent
John 1:19-27
December 18th, 2016

The Gospel for last week, Matthew chapter eleven, shares with us a question posed by John the Baptizer to Christ. *“Are you the One to come, or are we to look for someone else.”* John asked this question through his own disciples while he was sitting in prison. Was John confused? Did John recognize the Lord? This week’s Gospel reading describes a situation where John is not asking the questions, but rather on the receiving end. The priest and the Levites ask John, *“Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet? Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”*

Were the priest, Levites, and the Jews of Jerusalem (who sent the priests and Levites) confused? Could they not recognize the Lord? It seems like there is a lot of confusion. Who is the Christ? Are you the Christ? You’re not the Christ, Are you? Everyone seems confused.

However, are things really any different today? Life is confusing. With the “over sensitivity” shown toward anyone who might “self-identify” as anything other than what God has made them to be, we aren’t even sure what pronoun to use to refer to a particular individual. And if you get it wrong, shame on you. It’s confusing. Computers were invented to make life easier, but instead of simplifying life, now things seem harder. You have to order your food – on line. You have to apply for the job – on line. You have reserve your spot at the barber shop – on line. And don’t forget, you have to make a username and a password for nearly every website service you visit. It’s confusing.

Today, we have trouble recognizing who others are and, on top of all that... who we ourselves happen to be. You have a label depending on what group is evaluating you. If it’s a group of Christians outside of our denomination, you are a Lutheran. If it’s a group from a different religion, you are a blasphemer. If it’s a group that think Christians like you are narrow minded and out of touch with society, you are prejudice, you are a bigot, and you are old fashioned. Things are confusing.

In this time of Advent and, in a few days, this time of Christmas, we still get caught up in not being able to “recognize” – being confused. We interpret it one way. Someone else another way. And though it is true... that very over played adage, “Jesus is the reason for the season” is why we have Advent and why we have Christmas. The world is confused.

Some of you know, a couple of weeks ago we got a new/used car. For 17 years our old Ford got us where we needed to go... most of the time. It still had a cassette tape player... even though I don’t think I can even find a cassette tape if you asked me to do so. Anyhow, I have a new radio and I can change stations on my steering wheel. Now I’m living. And like any man, I don’t care what’s on the radio, I care more about what “else” is on the radio. So, I was flipping the stations on my steering wheel. Monday, I went down to pick up Ben from school which is a considerable drive. I was flipping through the stations and I counted seven different times from seven different radio commercials what supposedly is the real reason we celebrate Christmas. And according to those radio commercials the real reason is so that we can give gifts. Giving gifts means, of course, buying gifts. And buying gifts means money for those who put out those commercials. But is that the real reason why we celebrate Christmas? The only real gift that concerns us does not come from the showroom floor. Rather, it came to us in a package of swaddling clothes and laying in a manger. If the real meaning of Christmas is the giving of the gift of Christ, then those commercials are right. But that is not what they are talking about. So, we tend to get a little confused. And it becomes very hard to recognize what this season is all about. Advent, a time of spiritual preparation for Christmas, offers all of us the chance to reexamine our spiritual life and especially our relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

Have you ever looked for someone you haven’t seen for a long time and then walked right by them because they have changed so much? You didn’t recognize them. Granted, our God is an unchanging God, but the people of His day still did not recognize Him. It had been a long time. There were many promises being made by the prophets. But no Christ, at least not yet. And then when the Savior came and was born in

the city of David, in a manger with the animals, they didn't recognize Him, and started to become confused. It had been a long time and the face of Jesus was not the face of King. It was not the face of a Savior. It looked more like a shepherd's face. He wore Shepherd's clothing. And the people were confused and they walked right by Him. Even though this baby born so lowly would heal the sick, give testimony that He was the Son of God, fulfill the prophecies of long ago, they were confused and they did not recognize Him.

Many of John's hearers were eager to see what the Messiah God would do, but they did not know Jesus was the Messiah. Their problem was ignorance. It was a common problem then and it is a common problem now. The people who expected God to send a Messiah were usually looking for the wrong kind of person. They wanted someone who could make life easier for them by changing the government, by making it easier to find a livelihood, or by at least cheering them with hopeful thoughts.

Ignorance needs to be reckoned with. There are still many people living in our neighborhoods who have never had a substantial conversation about Jesus Christ with someone who knew what they were talking about. There are many others who have heard a lot about Jesus but not from people they trust. And yet there are many of us who look in the wrong direction when it comes to knowing our Savior and what He has done for us. And you know, just hearing that old adage, "Jesus is the reason for the season" is not enough. Just saying that, might be confusing. And just saying that does not help us recognize the Son of the Living God.

Do we recognize Jesus? That's what we claim. The church, certainly our church, claims to recognize Christ. Our creeds and confessions testify to our understanding of Him and faith in Him in terms we find unmistakably clear. For this reason we have stood here already today and many times before making confession to one another and before our God regarding who we believe. We know the creed and if we have said it once, we have said it a thousand times. But that doesn't stop us from saying it again and again. We make the confession again and again because our Church and this community of believers never stops believing what is contained in those words. I believe!! I believe in the Father. I believe in the Son. I believe in the Holy Spirit. It never stops and it never falters.

So then, why would we ever have trouble recognizing the Lord? Because we tend to listen to the world too much. Instead of Jesus being the reason for the season, we take to heart more readily those words from all those radio and TV commercials and rather believe, "Giving is the reason for the season." Give to those you love. Give to those you don't love. But don't give because that's what Christmas is all about. But give because you know, the greatest gift has already been given to you.

Look at that Advent wreath over there. Do you recognize it? I'm sure you do. Do you know exactly where it came from? You might not. You see, the Advent wreath didn't start as a Christian custom. Rather, it was a pagan custom that gave birth to the Advent wreath. During the time of the Winter solstice, when the days are short and the nights long, people would usher in the sun by burning candles usually on some kind of wheel decorated with greenery. Today, Christians use the Advent wreath to symbolize the age before the coming Christ, when the light of prophecy concerning the Messiah became brighter and brighter till He Himself came and said, "*I am the light of the world.*" Hence, we light another candle each Sunday we get closer to Christmas.

Did you know that? You might not have. But could you recognize the Advent wreath anyway? Yes, you recognize it. You and I don't really know how God could humble Himself and come to us as a little child born sinless yet He Himself is without sin. We really don't know how all that infinite majesty could be contained in that temporal, finite body used as a vehicle to teach us and to die for us. We really don't know how Christ was able to die for us and thus proclaim us Holy and Blameless before the Father. We really don't know. But we do know that He did it. And we recognize our Savior by the wounds on His hands and the love that He has shown. We recognize that little child lying in the manger.

"*Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? Who are you?*" His reply, "*I am the voice of the one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord.*" He is coming. He comes. And we know by Bethlehem and, most importantly, the cross exactly who He is. Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.