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Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

John 1:6-8; 19-28

A NO BEFORE A YES

An investigative team was dispatched from the capital city to interrogate someone who they understood to be challenging the status quo. The fellow they were checking into was a bit odd, but that was not the rationale behind their questions. They were there because they saw this person as a threat to the powers that be. Since his message was, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” he challenged those in seats of power from Jerusalem to Rome who depended upon ways being crooked instead of straight, who rested their prospects on the ways of power and intimidation rather than the ways of God.

They ask first about his identity. But we are not told about the intonation that came with the question. It makes a big difference. It could be ‘who are you’, with an honest inquisitiveness. Or it could be ‘who are you’, as in who in the (pause) world are you? I’m inclined to think the second intonation is closer to what was asked. If the questioner had been out of central casting as an old southern sheriff, the question would have sounded like, “Just who in God’s green earth do you think you are, boy?”

John doesn’t seem to be intimidated, but he does respond in an unusual kind of way. He starts by telling them who he is not. I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, I am not the prophet. Earlier, the narrator in describing him indicated that John also was not the light that had come from God, but that he instead came in order to testify to the light.

As long as there have been Christians gathering in community, practicing the faith through worship and study and gestures of reconciliation to each other, there have been leaders who disappoint in their leadership qualities. I suggest that many of the moral failings of leaders come from being unclear about who they are not, because it is very easy to cross ethical boundaries if you believe that you are more than you actually are.

Since John the Baptist begins with a triple renouncing, no to an identity as Messiah and Elijah and Prophet, added to the earlier 'no' to being the source of light from God, this odd character is then able to say that he has some understanding about his identity. He sees himself as having a part, a limited, but important, part in God's story. God was doing a new thing and he had been called to play a part in the new thing that was to hit the stage. John could do that once he was clear about who he was not.

We live in an age which tempts us with marketing pitches, intended to make us believe that everything is possible for us, that you and I can do anything we set our minds to do, as long as we open our wallets or purses. With that approach, there is not enough time in the day for all the things to which we could say 'yes.' Such daydreaming and distraction can keep us from exploring and saying 'yes' to our true identity, our true calling and vocation.

The identity question is for more than just individuals. There are people who look at the church these days and ask, 'who are you?' Some ask it with true curiosity and some ask it out of anger. They may assume that we might continue to affirm some of the old ways of being church, that with all the good that came with it, there were also practices that excluded women and people of color from finding a seat of influence, or that relegated children and youth to a place that is seen but not heard. A clear 'no' to such practices is necessary for us as part of the church to find our appropriate identity for how we fit into God's story in this time and place.

As Jesus was starting his ministry, there were pressures for him to say 'yes,' to a variety of different roles he could have played. But in a defining moment in publicly speaking about his calling from God, Jesus was in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He was afforded the honor of getting to read scripture for the day. Upon being handed the scroll, he finds the text from Isaiah 61 that we read earlier. He reads, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he told those listening that those words had been fulfilled in their hearing. For it to be Jesus' calling to bring good news to the oppressed, he had to first say 'no' to just telling the rich and powerful

all that they wanted to hear. For him to say ‘yes’ to binding up the brokenhearted, he had to first say ‘no’ to simply hanging out only with those who were happy with the way things were. He had to reject a model for ministry that focused only on the desires of the successful if he was going to liberate those who were held captive by oppressive structures in society. Some wanted him to say that the Lord’s favor only extended to certain groups of people, but Jesus said ‘no’ to that too, because of the depth and breadth of goodness that he saw God wanting to pour out upon all people. He clearly rejected a role of accommodating those who focused on the love of power, so he could widely proclaim the power of love.

There are certain pressures for us as people of faith to accept some so-called ‘realistic’ appraisals of human prospects, that we might as well accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty. But we are called to say a firm ‘no’ to such despair, in order to say ‘yes’ to the One who comes into the world so that all might have life and have it abundantly. Some act as if hatred, violence, and bullying must ultimately have the last word. But we say ‘no’ to that, because we believe a child has been born for us, that a son is given to us, that authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting, Prince of Peace. ¹

The question, ‘who are you’ comes to us as individuals and as a faith community. Among those who ask the question of us is God, whose tone is not one of interrogation, but of loving invitation. God wants to guide us through a series of ‘noes’ and ‘yeses’ to find our identity, our calling, in relation to the One who is the light of the world. God empowers us to say ‘no’ to ambition in order to say ‘yes’ to aspiration. As we do so, we will also find purpose and meaning for our lives as we discover how our story might fit into God’s story. One more question for this day: once we understand that we are not the source of God’s light, can we become those who reflect that light through our words and deeds? The answer, by the power of God’s love is – unquestionably yes! Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ This paragraph is dependent upon ideas expressed by Daniel Berrigan in a piece entitled ‘Advent Credo’ found in Testimony: The Word Made Flesh, Orbis Books, 2004.