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## Who Are You?

John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery in Duke University Chapel on December 14, 2014

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The spotlight is shining brightly on the human condition these days. Public demonstrations all over the nation due to the use of force and violence toward black men in particular, ending in their deaths. Revelations of torture at the hands of the C.I.A. If we didn't realize it before, it may be in this moment of history that we recognize how we have lost our humanity because humanity created in the image of God would not treat one another like this. If we were truly human, we would not hurt each other like this. To be human, coming from the Latin word *humus*, means to be of the soil, the earth, to be down to the ground. To be human suggests humility and it appears, if I am to be honest, that we have lost humility as well and replaced it with hubris, such that we, acting like little gods, take other people's lives in our own hands. And some lives apparently don't matter at all. But, #BlackLivesMatter. #AllLivesMatter. And though we are at Duke, #EvenUNCTarheelBlueMatters.

The spotlight is shining on the divided United States; it is shining on us and our cancer and no political chemotherapy will be able to remove it. No social radiation program will be able to get to the root of the sickness. The "die in" protests occurring may actually be an appropriate form of remembrance of where we find ourselves because they recall those who have died due to violence and remind us of how we are dead within ourselves already. A "die in" has already happened in our hearts. That's what has gotten us into this predicament. We are dead but we think we are alive. This is a cosmopolitan, equal opportunity, spiritual death. Some will call it sin and even its wages are death. A "die in" represents what we look like on the inside. We have died within and our souls have become incubators of death. Or, the oxygen has been pulled, and we, like the image of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, may have bones, sinews, flesh, but no breath. Our breath, our life, has been choked out to such an extent that we may also declare, "we can't breathe" because we are dead within. The "die in's" in broad daylight illuminate our own death as the human race. This interior death with exterior ramifications causes us to miss each other such that we don't even see our common humanity anymore. And worse, we apparently can't even see God. We miss the mark because we don't act like children of God but more like children of a Death squad.

Can we live again? As a Christian, I say, like Desmond Tutu when he was interviewed about South African apartheid, "I'm a prisoner of hope." So I do believe we can answer "yes" to that question.

But we have to ask the right questions that will point in the right directions because the questions you ask shape the answers you receive. What do I mean? If you only ask about yourself, you may only learn about yourself. If we never ask about God, we may never find God. Sometimes our lens is only anthropological, only on us, about us. This is a symptom, as I've noted before, of an i-world. iPhone, iPad, iCloud.

Just recently a ministerial colleague had an interesting conversation with his young daughter. She asked her father one night, "What do you call a fish that only cares about itself?" That question stopped in his tracks. He asked her to repeat it again. "What do you call a fish that only cares about itself?" He didn't know and asked her for the answer. She replied, "selfish."

We can approach life only thinking about ourselves, reading the world with a humanistic hermeneutic. The religious leaders ask John my sermon title for today—"Who are you?" One time was not enough for them so they ask it three times. "Who are you?" They say, "We need to give an answer to those who sent us." Why are they so concerned with John's identity? Why are they repeating this question? Is it that if they get an answer they can control or categorize or objectify or essentialize him? Check off a census box about his identity, thinking that is the summation of his personhood? I doubt they are really interested in

who he is at the core, even though they don't ask him what is his name but who he is. It's an important question: "Who are you?" Notice it is not "what do you do?" How would you answer that question—"who are you?" These religious leaders are not attempting to do spiritual direction with John; they want an answer on their own terms.

But if John was not strange enough already with his attire and eating habits and natural dwelling, his final answer is also distinct. At first, his responses are "I am not..." I am not the Christ, not Elijah, and not the prophet. The answer he eventually gives may be surprising yet illuminating. He says, "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness..." "I am a voice." This is an interesting way to speak of oneself—as voice. A voice is part of one's physiology. It makes sound. It is personal. John can lead us to consider the role of sound in discipleship, sound as a potential medium of revelation, a Christian acoustemology, reminding us that faith comes by hearing. Voice is important and I'm so glad John named himself because others probably had some not-so-nice names for him, ideas about him because of what he looked like or what he ate. But he had personal agency and self-identified. "I am a voice." Lift every voice, the hymn declares. But let's be clear that John isn't saying he is an actual physical voice—that would make him even more of a weirdo in the wilderness. Voice, in this context, is a metaphor.

People are always talking about finding their voice or coming to voice, which is the figurative usage of the term. It is a way of talking about one's identity, one's presence, one's being in the world. To use your voice is to announce your existence—"I am here." But there are those who have lost their voice, physically and metaphorically. And when one loses their voice it can almost be like losing oneself, one's identity, even one's vocation. Or, maybe one's voice has been silenced by other voices and this is unacceptable because I don't think anyone is rushing to declare, "I am an ear." Everyone wants to be heard and not just hear. Everyone deserves to be heard. A voice gets to speak and express oneself, to outter the inner, thus to silence or mute a voice is denying someone's identity and humanity, who they are in the image of God. We never want to shut off someone's voice so that they can't breathe. Every voice matters.

We don't sit in chairs, like on the TV show called "The Voice," judging singing voices for their quality and deciding to bring them on our team or not. #EveryVoiceMatters. Life is not a competition. Every voice should be accepted into the community of humanity. However, this isn't always the case.

There was a pastor who had a street ministry in Memphis, TN. This pastor became acquainted with a certain homeless man suffering from years of alcoholism. One day this cleric received a call that his homeless friend was hemorrhaging to death. This church leader was respected in the community and several of his church members worked in ER so he called the ER and told them he was on his way with this man. The waiting room was packed as it is many times. This pastor's friend was treated immediately even though there were no empty examining rooms. They stretched the pastor's friend on the floor and began giving him the necessary drugs. As this was happening, an older woman there tugged at the pastor's sleeve. She was there with another woman and pregnant teenager. She told him that it was good he was able to get this man some help and the pastor said, "I try to do what I can." The older woman replied, "I hope you never become poor." Why? he asked. "Because," she said, "when you become poor you lose your voice" (Mary Lin Hudson and Mary Donovan Turner).

Reformer Martin Luther had his own perspectives on voice. He said, "The voice is a poor miserable thing, to be reckoned as the least of creatures, not more than a breath of wind. As soon as the mouth ceases speaking, the voice is gone and is no more, so that there can be nothing weaker or more perishable. Yet it is so mighty, that I could rule a whole country with my voice." Don't underestimate what it means to have a voice in this world. Don't underestimate John's voice either.

John's trope of voice is not really about identity politics rooted in the social movements of the 1960s up to today. He's not really focused on the assertion of the self. He's not really interested in the question,

“who are you?” Rather, he wants his listeners to wonder about who Jesus is. This doesn’t mean our voices don’t matter; it just means that we are not the Word of God. John uses his voice so that the Word can be heard. This is not the erasure of the self and one’s particularity for some overarching universal ideal because God embraces particularity. But it does mean that who we are is actually tied to who Christ is and if we don’t know who Jesus is, we won’t truly understand our own identity, our own voice.

If someone asks, “Who are you?” Your first response may be to cite your family name or occupation or degree program or geographical home or denominational heritage—“I’m Baptist. Baptist born. Baptist bred and I’ll be Baptist dead.” We may choose a category and place our identity within it yet no mere category can encapsulate the fullness of human identity. Perhaps this is why John uses the figurative description of “voice”—to leave an openness of meaning and not to close off one’s identity and entomb it inside one thing.

John is not self-absorbed with the sound of his own voice; he is, as some philosophers might say, “*otherwise*.” As a voice, he is a messenger and not the actual message and sometimes we get that confused. He is a voice that makes the word “sound across the desert of human life” (C Spurgeon). He knows he is not the Word made flesh nor is he the Light. Yet his presence, his identity as a voice, is inseparable from the Word. His voice cries, “make straight the way of the Lord.” Who he is, is wrapped up in who Jesus is. Jesus may say, “I am.” But John says, “I am not.” He knows who he is not and embraces who he is through his embrace of who Jesus is. Like the apostle Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

As a voice, John may speak the Word but he does not create the Word nor is he the Word. He came as a witness to testify to the light. A ‘witness,’ coming from the word that means martyr (Jn 1:7, 19). It occurs 45 times in John’s Gospel thus this public testimony should get our attention (cf. Jn 4:39, 5:36, 37, 39; 12:17, 15:26, 27). The stakes are high because it can cost you your life. John learned this. As a witness, he pointed away from himself. This is why the question, “Who are you?” may not be the right question for Advent.

“Who is Jesus?” is the right one. John is not the light. We are not the light. In the words of St. Francis of Assisi, ‘We are the moon reflecting the rays of the sun from our surface.’ John knew who he was because he knew who Jesus was. John recognized that it wasn’t about him and his voice and that his purpose served Another. Our place in the world does not revolve around us but serves the larger purposes of God’s redemptive action for all of creation. We don’t belong to ourselves. You may not believe me but just ask Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The religious leaders in our story may not have realized this so they focused on John with their questions—“who are you?” John’s testimony, however, reveals that question as a less important question than “Who is Jesus?”

It may not just be the religious leaders in the story who overlook that question. The planners of the lectionary may feed into this too, based on how they divided up today’s lectionary. There’s so much focus on John that one may come away missing Jesus. But John points to Another. “Someone greater stands among you, whom you don’t recognize.” This may not be surprising because perhaps we don’t normally recognize greatness in our midst and take things and people for granted. Maybe there is so much attention on the wrong thing that we miss who is before us, even if it is the Messiah. “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing” (Luke 10:41-42).

We can miss the Messiah if we aren’t careful. The lectionary does, this week. They skip over some major things about Jesus, about who he is, which is what we should be thinking about this time of year, not so focused on ourselves, our parties, our gifts, our wish list, our voice. The huge self-help industry may declare, “That we alone have the power within us to solve our problems, relieve our anxieties and pain, heal our illnesses, improve our golf game or get a promotion”(1987 Forbes story). It may imply that our help only comes from within and we only have to be concerned with who we are. But Advent reminds us

of one who comes from outside of ourselves to reside in us and beyond us and is our true help and greater than anything we might become. We can miss the Messiah by just focusing on John. In all of the calls for justice in our day, we can miss Jesus who might be right in our midst and we aren't even asking about him because we don't recognize him. We lack a sacramental imagination and perhaps believe that Jesus only lives in the Bible or in this building deemed by the Huffington Post to be the most spiritual place in North Carolina, so when we go into the marketplace of life, we only see ourselves.

It may seem as if Jesus is nowhere to be found in the world or scripture. But in the verses left out of the lectionary in this same chapter, we hear that he is the eternal Word who was in the beginning and was with God. "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people....He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." The fulfillment of Greek philosophy's strivings. The Desire of all nations. Our All in All. This Word is in fact indescribable and uncontainable and immutable and uncontrollable and so indefinable that the prophets turn to poetry to express this glory—"every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Isaiah 40). Mere words cannot fully grasp the Word. The Word who gives us voice. The Word who speaks for us when we lose our voice. The Word who is a light, a bright and morning star, shining brighter than the noonday sun. Jesus is the light, the light of the world.

*O come, thou Dayspring from on high,  
And cheer us by thy drawing nigh.  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

*Walk in the light, beautiful light,  
come where the dewdrops of mercy shine bright.  
Oh shine all around us by day and by night,  
Jesus is the light of the world;*

We can miss all of this if we only focus on ourselves, our identity, who we are. But if we follow the sound of John's voice, it will lead you to see a light and hear a Word that is life for all people by "die in" on a cross. In other words, #JesusMatters. We are like grass and the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of our God will stand forever.