

“Our Role in Jesus’ Return”

Advent 2017 – part 3

John 1:19-34

Hymn of Illumination: EMMANUEL

Prayer

I was in a lot of plays when I was younger. You know those crazy school and church Christmas plays? I played Alvin the Chipmunk, Santa Claus, even the “Easter Bunny” in a toy shop – a toy nobody wanted to buy at Christmas time, so they made me into a “Christmas Bunny.” The thing was, in most of those dramas, I remember really wanting to have the lead role. I didn’t want to just be one of the angels in the chorus or a random wise man or a shepherd. I wanted to be Joseph, or whoever the leading role was.

When people audition for a part, everyone wants the starring role. Everyone is hungry for recognition, whether we admit it or not. We think highly of ourselves, and we want others to notice.

There is something about supporting roles, though. They are kind of like shoelaces – probably not the most important part of your wardrobe, but you sure notice when they are not there.

This morning I want us to realize something: we all have supporting roles in Advent, as we wait for Jesus to return. We are not the lead characters in this story; Jesus is! Christmas is all about Christ. It’s in the name. Our role is to draw the attention to him, the protagonist in the story of salvation. We are here to prepare for Jesus’ big entrance.

So how do we prepare? What are our lines? How do we earn the nomination for best supporting actress or actor in the story of Jesus? This is

where we turn to John the Baptist as our drama coach. The Oscars didn’t exist in AD 30, but if they had, John would certainly have earned one.

As we open our bibles to John chapter 1, I want to clear up some confusion. There are several Johns in the Bible. Tradition ascribes the Gospel of John to John the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples, and part of the group of three that Jesus kept closest to him: Peter, James and John. John the Baptist, on the other hand, was neither the author of this gospel nor a disciple of Jesus. Also, even though some bible translations call this prophet in the desert “John the Baptist,” he was not the founder of the Southern Baptist church. No kidding! A better title for him would be “John the Baptizer.”

The Baptizer came on the scene just before Jesus started his ministry. The Bible says that John was literally sent from God. (John 1:6) His role was to prepare the way for Jesus.

People demanded answers from John. They thought he knew the script. It was all the rage in 1st century Palestine to look for the Messiah and the signs that would accompany his arrival. The Jews who went out to question this prophet were looking for the star of the show. Yet John denied the chance to claim three important roles.

First, they asked if he was the Messiah. As you see in verse 20, John clearly said, multiple times, he was not. The Jews were hoping to find the political and spiritual savior who would liberate Israel from Roman oppression. This was a big deal. It seemed like everyone hoped that their son would be Israel’s savior. But John freely denied he was the One.

Next, they asked if the Baptizer was Elijah. You might have heard this name before. In 2nd Kings 2, Elijah gets taken up to heaven by a chariot of fire. (Yes, just

like the song and movie.) The Jews knew that after Moses, Elijah was the greatest prophet Israel had ever known. Elijah, since he never actually died, was expected to return to Israel to announce the Messiah’s coming. Malachi 4:5-6, literally the last words in the Old Testament, promise that Elijah would come to turn the hearts of the people. This might not have been as good of a role as the actual Messiah, but it was a close second. Certainly Elijah would have made the movie poster. But John the Baptizer said, no, he was not Elijah.

The Jews continued to press John. Was he the Prophet, with a capital “P”? This reference comes from Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses said, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.” That’s a very important part: a prophet who has authority from God so that all of Israel must listen to him. Yet still, John the Baptizer refused to take that role.

The thing is, John actually had aspects of both Elijah and the Prophet. Jesus told the people later that John was a prophet (Matthew 11:9) and John was the “Elijah to come,” in a figurative sense. (Matthew 17:10.) In these ways, John did make it possible for the people to receive the Messiah. So why did John himself not accept these titles?

It all has to do with humility. John did not want the lead role. He reserved that part for Jesus. John told the people that he was not even worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus. This refers to a custom they may be hard to relate to today. The job of the servant or slave in the house was to take off everyone’s smelly shoes and wash their feet. As you can imagine, it was a lowly job, and somebody had to do it. John said that Jesus was so much greater than he, John wouldn’t even try to

take Jesus’ shoes off, let alone wash his feet. John wasn’t worthy to be Christ’s slave.

John was clear about his role: he was the supporting actor to introduce the Messiah, God’s way to save the world. Let me set the scene for you. [PICTURE] This is a picture of the Jordan River, in a place tradition says John was baptizing. Imagine John, standing by this famous river, no wider than Intermediate River here in Bellaire, and he sees Jesus walking on the shore, and speaks the line that he was born to say: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” (John 1:29-30)

John had one job to do: help others follow Christ. He threw himself into that role, and nothing – certainly not pride – would stop him. John would not play the larger part the people wanted him to. John only wanted Jesus to be greater. John knew, even though Jesus appeared in “Act 2, Scene 2,” that Jesus was much better, much more glorious, much more worthy of honor and praise than John himself. John knew Christ “was before him,” literally, he existed, eternally, before John was even born. That is quite a dramatic entrance, and John nailed his line perfectly, and disciples began to follow Jesus immediately.

John the Baptizer revealed Jesus the Christ. John prepared the stage for Christ and then vacated his place. Have you ever watched improv comedy? The best improv groups play to each other’s strengths. Each one in the group tries to make everyone else look good. If someone does a great chicken impersonation, another actor tries to set up the scene so that their partner can be a chicken. In improv, you intentionally try to get out of the spotlight. Groups that do this well are funny. Individuals that hog the spotlight can ruin the show.

In the drama of salvation, John takes himself out of the spotlight. Listen to this last testimony from John the Baptizer: (John 3:26-30)

²⁶They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

²⁷To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰He must become greater; I must become less.”

Ask yourself honestly, have you ever thought that about Jesus? “He must become greater, and I must become less”? How often does our own pride stand in the way of Jesus getting the glory he deserves? How often do we use Christmas for our own ends, the holiday we should be using to celebrate the birth of the Savior?

The truth is, people demand a lot from us. They demand answers. They want us to be the ones who save the day, the ones who take the lead role. And honestly, it is tempting to give in to their desires. But John shows us, we simply can’t do that. I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but you cannot save the world. Only Jesus can save the world.

So what part will you seek in this heavenly drama? Will you focus on yourself, or on Jesus? Are you trying to earn the “best supporting actor/actress award”? It all comes down to how much you talk about Jesus. We learn from John that our primary way to reveal Jesus is simply to talk less about ourselves and more about him. When we interact with others, we can seek to make Jesus greater in our lives. This is no easy task, because it goes against our natural

inclinations and our pride. To realize who Jesus is, to really follow him as his disciple, we must practice becoming “less.”

I want to challenge you to do something this week. Remember, on Christmas we celebrate Jesus’ “birthday”. Have you gotten him a present, yet? If not, I have a few suggestions.

The first one is: Give Jesus your heart. Give him the very center of your being, your whole life. Admit your failures to him, believe he died for you on the cross, accept his grace and forgiveness, and learn to live for him instead of yourself. Let Jesus be the director of the grand drama of your life.

There is a second gift you can give Jesus. It is also a gift you can give to someone else. Be like John the Baptizer for someone else. Prepare the way for them to meet Jesus. This might mean literally asking them if they are baptized...although, please, let a pastor do the sacrament! But in your own way, reveal Jesus to them. Talk about Jesus, instead of yourself. Invite them to coffee and share your faith with them. Offer to pray for them. Invite them to church or a Bible study. In doing so, you give Jesus a great gift: an opportunity to change someone’s life.

Shakespeare once said, “All the world’s a stage, and the men and women merely players.” That is only half of the truth. If all the world is a stage, then Jesus is the star of the show. How we play our part determines how much glory Christ will receive in our lives. Our role is to deflect the spotlight on the Lamb of God, so that the audience can see the story of salvation and find their own part in it.

Memory Verse: John 1:34

“I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Would you say that Jesus receives glory from your life? Why or why not?
2. How did John prepare the way for Israel to receive Christ? How successful do you think he was?
3. When it is easiest for you to talk about Jesus? When is it the hardest?
4. Think of someone you know who doesn’t know Christ? How can you reveal Jesus to them? What steps will you take?