



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092  
(262)241-3121 [www.stjohnsmequon.org](http://www.stjohnsmequon.org)  
Email: [office@stjohnsmequon.org](mailto:office@stjohnsmequon.org)  
**Pastor James Tiefel**  
**(262) 853-9723 (cell#)**  
Email: [pastortiefel@gmail.com](mailto:pastortiefel@gmail.com)

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## **The Third Sunday in Advent**

**December 17, 2023**

### **Come, Lord Jesus His Coming Brings a New Identity**

The American dream: In America the poorest child can become wealthy. The smallest child can play professionally. The shyest child can become president. In the land of the free and the home of the brave we can become what we were not.

Because of Christ we can also become what we were not. By his mission and ministry, Jesus changes our identity from sinner to saint, from enslaved to free, from condemned to forgiven. In Advent we look for Jesus to come and we long for him to lead us from death to life.

#### **Sermon**

**John 1:6-8, 19-23**

**There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders<sup>h</sup> in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' " Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.**

Introduction – So I typed this phrase into Google the other day: "The most important questions in life." and found 8.2 million responses. Maybe I scanned 50 titles. "Seven Important Questions for Life." "65 Really Good Questions Everyone Should Ask." "100 of Life's Most Important Questions." What I discovered was exactly what I thought I was going to discover. There are three questions that are found on almost every list. One question has to do with origin: Where did I come from? Another with identity: Why am I here? And the third with destiny: Where am I going? People have been asking those three questions for a long time. Philosophers and theologians and historians ask them and so do plain, ordinary people like you and me.

What Google didn't tell me, at least not where I looked, is that all three of those questions can be summarized in one question: Is there a God? The answers to all three questions depend on the answer to that question. If there is no God, then all three questions have one answer: I don't know. Where did I come from? I don't know. Why am I here? I don't know. Where am I going? I don't know. But if there is a God, the answers are different. Where did I come from? God made me. Why am I here? God tells me. Where am I going? God saves me. Without God life has no answers. My life begins to make sense when I live with God.

The biggest question of all is this: Where do we find life with God? People have been asking that question for as long as there have been people. And people don't agree on the answer. You and I find life with God in Christ, but some people find life with God in other people and other places: Mohammed or Buddha or Joseph Smith. Some people find life with God in wealth or health or their own good deeds. Everyone asks the question but not everyone agrees on the answer.

The people John the Baptizer was preaching to at the Jordan River were all looking for life with God and John told them where to find it. We agree with what John preached. We find life with God in Jesus. But this episode in John's ministry makes us stop and think. How does life with God work in our lives? How does it play out in what we think and do? How does it apply in our relationships with others? So this morning we're going to watch the people John preached to and listen to the message John preached and then ask ourselves:

### **Where Do We Look for Life with God?**

Some people look for God in the wrong places. Do we?

John pointed people to Jesus. Do we?

The story of God's Old Testament people isn't a happy one. After the glory years of King David and King Solomon the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were battered and beaten by one enemy after another. The problem wasn't really a military problem or a political problem; the problem was spiritual. God's people had an ugly habit of rebelling against him, disobeying his laws, and worshiping false gods. Many times, they lived more like Satan's people than God's people. God saw the real problem and he sent terrors and troubles to lead them to repent and return. He sent preachers and prophets to point them to peace and release from sin. He promised to send a Messiah to save them and give them real life with God. A few of them listened but most of them didn't.

By the time John the Baptizer showed up the terror was Rome and most of the people believed that life with God meant freedom from Rome. Release meant release from Roman taxes and peace meant the end of Roman oppression. Their Messiah was a warrior-king who would send the Romans back to Rome. They wanted life with God in the worst way but life for them life with God was military and political, not spiritual. When John started preaching and baptizing, they were hoping and praying that the warrior/king had arrived and the Roman tide was about to turn.

**Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." These Jews knew the prophets and they remembered the promises. Elijah was Israel's greatest prophet, the prophet who had annihilated Ahab and Jezebel and the priests. The prophet Malachi predicted that Elijah would return before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Moses had promised that the Lord God would raise up a new prophet who would punish those who refused to speak the words of God. Was John the new Elijah or that prophet? More questions: **Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"** They were desperate; they wanted life with God so bad. But they were looking for life with God in the wrong places.**

We don't do that, do we—I mean we don't look for life with God in the wrong places, do we? We all know people who do. There are people who worship in synagogues and churches right here in Mequon who don't worship God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and a God without Christ is nothing but an idol. There are people in our towns who want a life with God they gain by their good deeds and their own clean living but no life is good enough or clean to earn life with God. There are Christian people close by us who want a warrior/king who will destroy evil with edicts and armies. But life with God comes in gentle quiet whispers. There are people in our neighborhoods, maybe even in our own homes, who long to know where they came from, why they're here. They are desperately looking for life with God but they're looking in the wrong places. You and I must search ourselves to be sure we are not thinking their thoughts or looking in their places.

John pointed people to life with God that comes with Christ. **I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."** The Lord was coming for sure—God promised to send Messiah—but John was not Messiah and he wasn't the Lord. John pointed to someone who was standing among them that day. **He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.** When St. John introduced his Gospel, he introduced us to the Word made flesh: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.** And then he introduced us to John: **There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.** We see the contrasts between the Word and the Baptist. The Word was *with* God; John was sent *by* God. The Word was *God*; John was a *man*. John preached so that people might believe *through* him; Jesus preached so that people might believe *in* him. Jesus is *the light of the world*; John was a *witness* to that light. Jesus said, *I am.*" John said, "I am *not.*" John pulled no punches when he preached in Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. Life with God can't be found in Elijah or the prophet or the Baptist or with an idol or a good life or a warrior-politician. John pointed the people to Jesus. Do we? Do we point people to Jesus as John did?

We have life with God through faith in Christ. Because of Jesus God forgives our sins. Because of Jesus we have peace with God. Because of Jesus God hears our prayers. Because of Jesus we have power to serve God. Because of Jesus we have a home in heaven. Because of Jesus we know for sure where we came from, why we're here, and where we're going. "My hope is built on nothing less," we sing, "than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare to make no other claim but wholly lean on Jesus' name." And that's why we search and examine ourselves every day so that we never look for life with God in persons or places besides Jesus.

John the Baptizer points us to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Do we point people to Jesus the way John did? Do the words we speak and the language we use identify that Jesus lives in us? Do the priorities people see in us lead them to see the value of Jesus? Does our faithfulness in worship say something about our identity with Jesus? Do we encourage people we love to be close to Jesus? Do our offerings reflect the love Jesus has for others? Do we love and live and work and give so that others may find life with God?

You won't find any of these questions in a Google search. They won't be listed among the 8.2 million entries about the most important questions of life. But they are vital questions for each of us. Do I find life with God in Jesus? Do I point others to life with God in Jesus? Pray God we answer with a heart of faith and love. Amen.