

Who Are You?

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Third of Six in the sermon series: "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?"

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

An Advent meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 17, 2023, dedicated to G. Dene Barnard, who has spent 50 years with us (1973-2023) and is in the hospital this morning, to all who are hurting from pain, hunger, the stresses of life, depression and other mental and physical health challenges and to all the innocent people of Ukraine, Israel, the West Bank, Palestine, Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia and other nations embroiled in war and civil war and always to the glory of God!

“Who Are You?”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Once again, this Sunday, we look at a question arising from the texts of scripture – one that may help us answer the larger question, “How does a weary world rejoice?” This one is asked twice in the Gospel of John – which you just heard. It is – “Who are you?” Please join me in prayer.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth the meditations of each one of your hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Imagine – for a moment – someone comes to your home or your workplace to ask one question. They arrive at your door or at your desk, and they have one question in their minds and in their hearts. The question is: **“Who are you?”**

“Who are you?” It’s not the kind of thing that happens every – that someone shows up and asks you – “Who Are You?” So, how would you answer that question?

You might begin by giving your name or job title. But that’s not what they are asking – is it. They are not interested in what you do or what your job title is. So, they keep pursuing. Their question comes back again, “**Who are you?**” They are going deeper. They really want to know – “Who are you!?”

“What do you say about yourself?” The two questions together are penetrating. What do you say about yourself? At the root, at the core of who you are – what do you say about yourself?

The question asked in the Gospel of John is “Who are you?” It is directed at John the Baptist. There are many things we could answer about “Who is John?” We could say, “John is a wild man. He eats bugs and honey. He baptizes everybody. He is a messenger of God. He wants everybody to repent and turn their lives around.

John is a **forerunner**. You all know what a forerunner is – one who runs before! As a **forerunner**, John is the person that comes before Jesus. He is announcing his arrival. He is baptizing with water (not with the Holy Spirit) the one who will come after him will do that. He is the predecessor, the harbinger, the herald. Very interestingly, he also reveals something else in this passage that shouldn’t be lost on any of us. He says, “you are asking me these questions. But the one is coming is RIGHT HERE – standing among you and you have no idea who he is.”

Most important of all is the words we find in John 1:6. It says it all. “John is a “witness to the Light.” (We will come back to this).

But how does John answer when cornered by the question, “Who are you?” and “what do you say about yourself?” John says this: *“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.”*

John came as a witness to testify to THE Light. He used his voice to cry out. He used a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He was not concerned about his own agenda, although clearly John knew what he believed was right and wrong – if you don't believe me – read the other three gospels. John was really concerned that people would see the Light of God coming into this world. He was like a neon sign in the middle of the desert highway in the middle of the night, **“HERE HE IS! THIS IS THE ONE!”** John stood in the darkness of his time pointing to the Light. John wanted everyone who had been created in the image of God, (that means each human throughout human history), if you will, “every star in the sky full of children,” to see that God's goodness had been fulfilled right in front of their eyes.

John was clear that he himself was neither the Messiah nor the ever-elusive prophet Elijah, nor any prophet at all. He was embarrassed by these questions. John was not even worthy to tie the thong of the sandal of “the Light.” Even though he arrived like thunder in the desert, it was Jesus who would later open the book of the prophet Isaiah, unroll the scroll of Haftorah in the synagogue of Nazareth and read with truth and authority:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

It was Jesus who was the promise. It was Jesus who was the promise given to all the nations. It was Jesus who would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. He would come to build up from the ancient ruins, to repair the former devastations, to bring the ruined cities back together. It was Jesus and It still **IS Jesus** that we need more than ever before on this planet in which darkness too often blows out the light in our times.

Although John's Gospel lesson focuses on John the Baptist's arrival proclaiming the coming of our “God's Light,” I cannot help but wonder about the

designer and the choices that God has made to give us this “Super Light” of Jesus.

I have so many questions about “the Light” and our relationship to him. Here is the first one (with lots of semicolons and commas...).

How is it that our God, who created God’s Universe, the Earth, all the stars, the swirling clouds of hydrogen gas that tie together solar systems and billions of planets and galaxies, our God who imagined, created and breathed design, and all the colors of light and life into everything else in all the universe and called it GOOD – how is it that our God would see to it to bring all of these intricate patterns of the universe into one bundle of human life and “Light” and then place this bundle in the womb of a woman, and call HER beloved and call HIM wonderful, counselor, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?

How is it? How could this be? How could we be so blessed to receive such a Light in our lives? Moreover, how could we ever miss this blessing? How could we turn away and laugh it off or shrug it off? How could we, whom God also created in God’s image – and in whom God also placed Light – ignore it or pretend this “Super Light” never existed or never came?

How could we, a “sky full of children,” God’s stars in this infinite universe whom God has also created to adore this Light, how could we MISS the dance, the song, the breath, the delightful smile, the healing word, the hopeful presence? How could we MISS the peace he brings? How could we not see and respond to the LOVE in the womb of a teenager from Nazareth in whom the universe took form and for whom the ancient stars found new light, and the ancient harmonies of sound found new voice and the angels of glory clapped their hands with joy? How could we miss this?

How could anyone on this planet miss this when we can find a blue and beautiful universe full of sister planets spinning 600 light years or 22 million calendar years away?

How could we miss that Jesus is “The Super Light” of our lives and of the universe?

From the vast and distant beauty of our Earth, I want to suggest something to you this week about Light and Love and Life. I believe the same light of God which came into being at the foundation of the Universe and found a place to shine from a feed trough in Bethlehem 2023 years ago, can be found shining in each and every one of us. I believe that our God who loves us so much that God would give us God’s **SUPER** light-shine in the person of Jesus Christ, also shines on us, and in us and through us to others. I believe that each of us is created in the image of God. And that’s not a belief I just produced myself. Read Genesis! It is there – from the beginning. Each of us is a star in the sky full of God’s children.

So, when I am asked, “**Who am I?**” **I have an answer.** I am a light of God shining in this world. **Who are you?** You are a light of God shining in this world. We are all the light of God shining in this world. As stars in the universe of God’s creative design, how could we each live in a way that supports anything but the light shine in ourselves and others?

One of the light shining inspirations of our times is Brene Brown. Some of you may know her writing. Some of you love her writing. Like me, some of you may be addicted to her videos. She’s amazing. She said in one of her videos I was watching the other day – “there are two things I can promise you about myself is that I cuss and I pray.” (What’s not to love?). She shines light on how we can healthfully interact with ourselves and one another and be active in transforming relationships. There is a wonderful inventory she uses for her work called BRAVING. Her focus is how we build trust with others. There are seven elements to her inventory. They allow for support for light shining in this world and in our relationships. In a nutshell they are the following:

Boundaries – Setting boundaries is making clear what’s okay and what’s not okay, and why.

Reliability – You do what you say you’ll do. At work, this means staying aware of your competencies and limitations, so you don’t overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

Accountability – You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

Vault – You don’t share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept, and that you’re not sharing with me any information about other people that should be confidential.

Integrity – Choosing courage over comfort; choosing what’s right over what’s fun, fast, or easy; and practicing your values, not just professing them.

Nonjudgment – I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

Generosity – Extending the most generous interpretation to the intentions, words, and actions of others.

BRAVING is an example of how we work to build trust in relationships and support the light shining work for each of our lives and our life together.

Returning to the beginning, I ask again, as our passage did in the beginning, **Who are you?** Perhaps, like John, each of us can answer, *“I am a witness to the Light.”* We, who are able to discover light and planetary brilliance spinning far outside our solar system, are also capable of nurturing, protecting and supporting the light shining inside ourselves and one another. If we are to make peace, find peace and be peace in this world and in this universe, which God has created, then each us will show that as a blessing, as those who follow the Super Light of the Word in our lives.

Jesus Christ, “the Super Light of the World,” came to us as a newborn baby – one who was wholly human and wholly divine to show us what it means to be created in the image of God.

Braving whatever it is that stands between us and our healing and our wholeness, may each one of us invite the Super Light of the World into our hearts,

into our lives and into our homes this Christmas. So, if somebody comes knocking at the door, you will know the answer. "I am Light shine!" As he has shined on me, I shine on others. And may his always shine on you, and in you and through you to others. And may the light within each of us shine bright. Amen.

