

Sermon on God is in your midst so don't miss God.

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Text:

John 1:19-28 ¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

1 Introduction

Groucho Marx was a famous TV and movie comedian in the 20th century. He had a lot of one-line jokes such as: "I never forget a face, but in your case I'll be glad to make an exception." He dressed peculiarly with round eyeglasses, rectangular shaped mustache, a cigar in his mouth, black suit, white shirt and dark tie. He was so popular they used to hold look-alike contests for him. One day he decided to participate in one of these look-alike contests without the knowledge of the establishment. He joined the contest dressed just like he always did. Each contestant had to say some of his jokes and act like him. As a contestant, Groucho said some of his typical jokes and acted his typical way. After the judges evaluated all the contestants they reported their findings. Someone else came in first. Another person came in second. Groucho Marx came in third! He was in their midst but they missed the real person!

Our main text narrates a story concerning John the Baptist and his ministry. But the real point has to do with Jesus as God standing among John's congregation but no one knew him. He was in their midst but they missed him. God was in their midst but they missed God.

2 John was preaching repentance and bearing good fruit

When John, son of Zechariah, grew older he got up one day put on his clothes made of a weave of camel hair with a leather belt, said farewell to his parents, and set out for the eastern part of the Jordan near Bethany. He began to preach and challenged the people to turn away from their sins and told them not to think that because they were born as Abraham descendents they are saved. He was saying to them that being born in the church does not matter. The fact that you label yourself a Christian does not matter. The fact that you come to church does not matter. He told them what matters is that you have to "Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God." (Luke 3:8)

Then they asked him what they should do. He answered. Stop bickering. Stop gossiping. Stop quarreling over post. Stop insulting your spouse. Stop beating your spouse. Stop cheating your

family members. Stop sowing dissatisfaction among members. Stop worshiping idols. Stop going to Christian fetish priests. Stop chasing after miracle workers.

He told those who have decided to bear good fruit that they “should be baptized to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.” (Luke 3:3) John then baptized them and many people came to see him.

3 Jerusalem sent a delegation to investigate John’s ministry.

His congregation became a mega church and so word got to the big wicks in Jerusalem about his work in the Transjordan. They called a meeting; they were concerned about this John guy. Nobody knew about him. He did not go to a rabbinic school or belong to any of their recognized sects. But the people were comparing him to the Prophet, announced in Deuteronomy 18:18. Others said he was the second incarnation of Elijah as announced in Malachi 4:5. Still others said he was the Messiah (the Christ). So they set up a delegation to go investigate. The delegation consisted of representatives from each of the wings: the priests were probably from the Sadducees, the Levites from the temple administration, and a group from the Pharisees.

3.1 The Jerusalem delegation asked him who he was.

When they arrived, John was preaching his heart away and baptizing. He warned them that, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9) Then one member of the delegation shouted, “Who are you? What authority do you have to say and do things you are saying and doing? Who empowered? Who permitted you?”

When we come to church we have some delegates here to question the pastor and question the church. Though they do not speak out loudly, they do it with their spirit.

- We have the Aposo Sadducees. They don’t believe that Jesus is coming anytime soon. They come to church just to be part of the social function. They question the need for spiritual discipline or holiness. If you discipline someone for sinning they object in the rumor mill.
- We have the Aposo Pharisees. They are holier than thou. They are legalistic. When you fast you cannot drink water. As a pastor you cannot eat with the members. If somebody in the church sins then the church is bad and they will want to leave the church. They want God to drive out all those who plainly sin in the church.
- We have the Aposo Levites. They were born in the church. They fight to preserve traditions in the church but care less about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was given to them in doses since they were born into the church and so they have developed immunity to the Word! They do what they think is right and what they think is right must be what the Bible says!

So the Aposo Sadducees, the Aposo Pharisees, and the Aposo Levites come to church to ask anyone leading any aspect of the church service, “Who are you?” Worship Leader, who are you? Praise Leader, who are you? Prayer Leader, who are you? Preacher, who are you? Secretary, who are you? Treasurer, who are you? Women’s leader, who are you?

3.2 The Jerusalem delegation asked him whether he was the Christ.

John continued to preach and baptize without answering them. So, the Jerusalem delegation shouted at John, “Are you the Christ?” Our text says “He did not fail to confess.” John could have said, “No comment,” and in so doing kept his reputation among the people for they would then assume he is the Christ!

3.3 “Keeping Up Appearances” British sitcom

In the BBC sitcom called “Keeping up appearances,” the main character, Hyacinth Bucket was the mother of all snobs. She organized and rearranged other people’s lives in order to maintain a snobby position. She will fail to mention a belittling truth, or imply an association with a high class person, and/or setup an arrangement to elevate her status. By the end of each show, however, her scheme would come crashing to the ground.

John could have kept up appearances. He could have refused to comment and hence maintain a certain status – a status that will be untrue. Do you keep up appearances in your life? Allowing people to think you are something that you are not? If you do that someday you will be exposed.

Instead, John “did not fail to confess.” John gave them an emphatic no. He was saying to them, “Don’t use the words I am saying to think I am the Christ. I am not the Christ. You are missing the point. Christ is in your midst and you have missed him.”

3.4 The Jerusalem delegation asked him whether he was the Elijah.

The Jerusalem delegates looked at him and thought, this guy’s dressing resembles Elijah. 2 Kings 1:8 tells us that Elijah “was a hairy man, and he wore a leather belt around his waist.” And furthermore God said in **Malachi 4:5** “Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives.” So they put two and two together and shouted at John, “Are you Elijah?”

Once again John could have said, “No comment,” and in so doing kept his reputation among the people for they would then assume he is the Elijah prophesied in Malachi 4:5, thereby keeping up appearances. But he answered them saying something like, “Are you crazy? My clothes mean nothing. I am not Elijah. Don’t look at how I dress and how I look. You are missing the point. God is in your midst and you have missed him.” Then John continued to baptize and preach shouting, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” (**Luke 3:7**)

3.5 The Jerusalem delegation asked him whether he was Prophet.

Then they looked at him again and thought, this guy’s message sounds like an end-time prophet so may be he is the prophet God spoke about when he said in **Deuteronomy 18:18**, “I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will tell that prophet what to say, and he will tell the people everything I command him.” So, the Jerusalem delegation shouted again, “Are you the Prophet?”

Once again John could have said, “No comment,” and in so doing kept his reputation among the people for they would then assume he is the special prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18 thereby

keeping up appearances. But he answered with another emphatic no saying something like, “Don’t look at my antics and my speech. You are missing the point. God is in your midst and you have missed him.” Then John continued to baptize and preach shouting, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:9)

3.6 The Jerusalem delegation asked him to identify or classify himself and his ministry.

With this final answer, the delegation was frustrated and shouted the following appeal to him: “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” (John 1:22) John, at this juncture, could have answered: “I am Prophet John sent by God himself. I have been specially called, anointed and gifted by God.” But John did not dwell on titles, he did not dwell on accreditation, he did not dwell on human authorization, he did not dwell on college degrees, and he did not invoke well-known names. Instead “John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”” (John 1:23)

John told them his mission and his work. What he was doing was more important than any title that they would want him to declare. This shows John’s humility, his dedication to the principles of servant leadership. Some people come to the church looking for positions and titles. They are not looking to do work. They get jealous of those who work for the church especially after we bestow positions on them. God is looking for workers and not title holders. Worcester needs workers and not position holders. Worcester needs servant leaders not servant bosses.

3.7 The Jerusalem delegation questioned his authority to conduct that type of ministry

So, John continued to preach shouting, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” (Luke 3:11) I would have thought John’s answer would have ended the inquiry by the delegation. But his answer gave rise to more questions. So again they interrupted his preaching and shouted something like, “If you are not the Christ, the Prophet, or Elijah, then what gives you the right to baptize, who ordained you, who appointed you, who certified you?”

4 John pointed to the invisible God among them as his authority

4.1 John announced the presence of Jesus in the crowd

John answered them shouting, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” (John 1:26-27) John effectively was saying, “You may question me all you want. You may dispute my credibility all you want. You may question my legitimacy all you want. But I am telling you that though you do not see him God is standing among you. He is the one who justifies my work. God is among you but you have missed him.”

I am sure everyone in the crowd started looking at each other to see if they recognized the Christ among them. God was among them but no one knew it. The delegation focused on John and missed God. The crowds focused on the work of John and missed God. They began to focus on each other and missed God.

4.2 *Jesus is in crowd today among you*

In the same way, when we come to church here you may question the person that is leading any aspect of the service. You may even say you know this person has committed the following sins only yesterday. But remember something, that he or she stands there, God is among you. This is because Jesus says, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (**Matthew 18:20**) Some focus on the personalities and miss God. Some focus on the music and miss God. Some focus on the preaching and miss God. Some focus on the antics of the prayer leader and miss God. Some focus on what that sister is wearing and miss God. Some focus on the prestige they associate with the leader and wished it was them and so miss God. But God is in your midst and you will do well not to miss him.

God is saying to you today: Stop bickering. Stop gossiping. Stop quarreling over post. Stop insulting your spouse. Stop beating your spouse. Stop cheating your family members. Stop sowing dissatisfaction among members. Stop worshiping idols. Stop going to Christian fetish priests. Stop chasing after miracle workers.

5 Conclusion

When I was in business I used to go to high-level meetings with investors or presidents of other companies. They knew my boss but did not know me. But because I was with my boss, as soon as we entered the reception and he mentioned his name I was given respectable treatment. The boardroom also gave me respectable treatment.

In the same way God is in your midst so do not miss him; acknowledge his presence with you and you will begin to receive breakthroughs. God is in your midst so:

- Doors that have been closed will be opened because of him. New paths will be created where there was no path. Situations that are unacceptable will be changed in your favor. Opportunities that were shut up to you will be opened for you. Obstacles that have been placed before you will be erased before you.
- Respect will come from your family who rejected you. Respect will come from your friends who shunned you. Respect will come from your co-workers who laughed you off.

This is why the Apostle Paul says “if God is with or for us who can be against us” and continues to say that the result of this is that “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”