

“CONFESSING IDENTITY”

JOHN 1: 6-8, 19-28

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University Church of Chicago
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He knew his name. That much he could remember.

He knew that his father’s family came from Thibodaux, Louisiana, and his mother was from Ireland, and he knew about the 1929 stock market crash and world War II and life in the 1940s.

But he could remember almost nothing after that.

The man known worldwide as H.M.—to protect his privacy—died a week ago last Tuesday of respiratory failure in a nursing home in Windsor Locks, Connecticut. His real name was Gustav Molaison. In 1953 he underwent an experimental brain operation in Hartford to correct a seizure disorder, only to emerge from it fundamentally and irreparably changed.

For the next fifty-five years, each time H.M. met a friend, each time he ate a meal, each time he walked in the woods, it was as if for the first time. And for those five decades, he was recognized as the most important patient in the history of brain science. As a participant in hundreds of studies, he helped scientists understand the biology of learning, memory and physical dexterity, as well as the fragile nature of human identity.

Eleven days from Christmas, with our streets and stores filled with shoppers, with cards to send and receive, packing for trips and parties to attend and people to see, it’s very easy to live on life’s smooth, shiny surface. The world is constantly lying to us, telling us that if we spend enough time at the East Bank Club fighting against sagging muscles and advancing avoirdupois, if we live independently and in spiritual isolation so that we won’t get hurt and if we have enough money for all those trips, we will be o.k. Christmas can easily become another symptom of our malaise, because it so easily assumes appearance and apparition rather than reality and spiritual depth.

It’s a perennial problem. It’s the issue which that obstreperous, difficult, demanding prophet, John the Baptist, declares as he comes out of the wilderness on the other side of the Jordan River, preaching a gospel of repentance. “Who are you?” the people ask. “I am not the Messiah.” “What then? Are you Elijah?” Or the prophet. None of those. Then, “Let us have an answer...What do you say about yourself.” “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

If the preacher preaches from the Common Lectionary and if the preacher considers the Gospel lection, the second and third Sundays of Advent are hard days to preach because you're stuck with John the Baptizer, this imperious prophet who tells the truth, who calls us to responsible ethical living and who demands that we say the hardest words in any language, to God and to others, "I'm sorry. I want to change."

It's no wonder that most Advent sermons succumb to the mood of the season: sweet, surface meanderings about being nice and sweet, about being more loving and attentive to the poor. John won't put up with it, won't let us off the hook that easily. He declares that God is demanding a changed way of life--'not just the same old pretense papered over at Christmas with some gooey feeling about a little baby born to a peasant couple as dumb animals stand around the entrance to a cave while a star shines brightly and angels sing.

The questions the people ask John the Baptizer about his identity are the same questions you and I have to deal with. Who are you? What are you doing with your life? What is important to you?

How does one live out his/her commitments? Creed and commitment, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel declared, are final. But how does one exercise one's ultimate commitment day after day? The self, you see, is always in motion. Because our lives lack permanence, because our self is always in conflict with itself and passionately concerned with itself, our lives are fraught with danger.

The hardest thing is to realize that all our neatly thought-out conclusions are but a series of premises. "He who thinks that he has finished," Kierkegaard declared, "is finished." Self-contentment is a sign of defeat. There exists in the inner life of each of us the tension between the ideal and the real—between what is expected and what can be accomplished. God calls us to live in constant tension between expectation and accomplishment, between the ideal and the real. That's our identity. Self-honesty and self-examination are prerequisites for religious integrity.

The problem is not whether to trust God but whether to trust that we are accepted by God.

The New Yorker carried a wonderful cartoon a couple of years ago; it depicted three guys sitting at a bar; the one in the middle looks sad as he says, "Before we married, she seemed like the sort who would suffer a fool gladly."

John the Baptist does not suffer fools gladly--'or at all. He stands in a long and glorious tradition: prophets just don't put up with our evasions and excuses, our procrastination and pretense. Consider Jeremiah, Hosea, Elijah, God's servants who told the truth and were willing to suffer for it.

I have read everything Ian Kershaw has written about Adolf Hitler, one of the most fascinating and, of course, evil people in the history of the world. In many ways, his books are depressing and I cannot read them for great lengths of time. Because they are so suffused with hatred, racism, conspiracy and, worst of all, the complicity of people just like you and me who consider themselves good and decent citizens, I have to put them down, go to another book or get up and walk around.

Writing about one of the pivotal moments in the history of the twentieth century, “Crystal Night,” November 9, 1938, when many synagogues were burned, Jewish homes were systematically looted, shops destroyed, women raped and children abused and the night got its name from all the store windows stoned and robbed, Kershaw writes, “Ordinary citizens, affected by the climate of hatred and propaganda appealing to base instincts, motivated too by sheer material envy and greed, followed the [Nazi] Party’s lead in many places and joined in the destruction and looting of Jewish property.”

Moreover, the state itself, the Nazi Party had become such a pervasive religion, endorsed by many Protestant and Catholic leaders in order to try to save their own positions of prestige and importance that the “Church Struggle” which Hitler, Heydrich and Himmler launched was realized too late. While Kershaw doesn’t endorse the theories of Daniel Goldhagen that Hitler came to power and was able to kill six million Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and priests, pastors and nuns because of the outright complicity of the German people, he nonetheless depicts people like you and me--’ordinary, middle-class, upwardly-striving folks--’as indifferent, sometimes silently appalled but usually afraid to risk.

It is to these folks who ask questions about what to do after they repent that John the Baptist gives specific, ethical instructions. If you want to live a new life--’the word *repent* means “to turn around,” to “take a new path,” then here are some clear answers. You folks who have two coats in this miserable Chicago winter: look at those homeless men who haunt the doors of our church each week. Share your bounty. See all those hungry people? How are you spending your money? To the tax collectors, the people in John’s time who were most despised because they could extort and live off the graft of others, he said to them and says to us, Do what you know is right. And to those who have authority over others, who grasp for more power because they believe they will, unlike everyone else in history, not be corrupted by it, Be satisfied with what you have. Don’t laud it over others.

Kierkegaard calls it “living by the pattern of Christ.” Something like but much deeper and more demanding than asking, “What would Jesus do?” It means living a life of sacrifice, a life of gracious forgiving, a life that sometimes demands us to go where we don’t want to go, do what is hardest to do. It’s not simple, it’s not easy and it always calls us to repentance and new turnings on the road.

There's an old story about a man whose wife brought home a monkey from the pet store. He didn't want a monkey in the house. "Where's the animal going to eat?" he asked. "At the table with us," his wife replied. "Where's he going to sleep?" "In our bed." "What about the odor?" "I got used to it, and I guess the monkey can, too," said his wife."

It's so easy for us to become accustomed to the stench, to the way things are, to living our lives as they are, becoming self-satisfied and indifferent in our piety that this season of repentance to which the Baptizer calls us gets transposed into a season of waiting and anticipation.

One of my favorite poets is R. S. Thomas, the Welsh Anglican priest who lived a very simple life among his parishioners while writing some of the most brilliant words in the English language (not his native tongue). Lewis Davies told the story of a traveler on Llyn who searched the peninsula for Thomas's cottage. He couldn't find the poet's house, so he asked a villager feeding goats in the early summer sunshine. Her answer was a question: "Why would you want to find him, a man like no other?"

"A person like no other."

That's what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ, a person like no other, who calls us to live unlike others who are seemingly satisfied with the surface. We are called to life's depths, to searching, to commitment to causes larger than ourselves.

Instead of succumbing to those sentimental, gooey feelings that pervade our lives during "the holidays," perhaps we can hear God calling us to new realities. The truth is that much of contemporary North American society with its cult of success and wealth is radically un-Christian and prophets like John are calling us to a new accountability. The preacher can no longer take for granted that those who come to church remember or ever understood the sort of God in whom we believe and the sort of people God therefore calls us to be. James Cone somewhere explains that African-American sermons have characteristically been so long because the whole rest of the week the dominant white society was telling black people they were of no worth, and so it took a while to talk them back into knowing who they really were. All of us need some reminding of who we are, and Christmas worship ought to provide it.

We take for granted that God is going to let us off the hook, that God is benign and gracious, never calling us to judgment and accountability. "Don't worry about your sins, God will forgive," D. H. Lawrence wrote to Kate Mansfield. "That's God's business." Is it possible to see the other side, that we should be terrified by God's Word? As Annie Dillard writes,

“The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

That wonderful Christian poet/undertaker/philosopher from Milford, Michigan, Thomas Lynch, writes in a poem, *Adoro Te Devote*:

Father Kenny taught me Latin hymns.
And, lost for words, I'd often chant Gregorian:
Adoro te devote, latens Deitas--'
a second tongue, more humbly to adore them in,
those hidden deities: the bodies of women,
the bodies of men, their sufferings and passions,
the sacred mysteries of life and death
by which our sight and touch and taste are all deceived.
By hearing only safely we believe.
And so I listened and am still listening.
I've heard the prayers said over open graves
and heard the pleas of birth and lovemaking.
“O God O God” we always seem to say.
And God, God help us, answers “Wait and see.”

Some realities we can see clearly. Others demand waiting. But, thank God, we are not left to our own devices. Our God is the One who forgives and makes new while at the same time demanding that we respond by giving our lives to causes larger than ourselves and to live by the pattern of our Risen Lord.