

## “Not the Real Thing”

John 1:6-8, 19-28 – December 14, 2008

INTRO: During Advent, we hear of John the Baptist—the forerunner of Jesus. This passage from the Gospel of John probably tells us more about who John the Baptist is not, rather than who he is. Even though the Gospel of John differs from what we find in the other Gospels as to the details about this person, all four of these books seem to indicate that knowing something about John the Baptist is important to understanding the life of Jesus.

There are some in this room who probably remember Coke’s advertising slogan back in 1969—“it’s the real thing.” Whether it’s soft drinks or blue jeans or candies or children’s toys, the people who market these items want us to buy the genuine article, the real thing. They are intent on convincing us that if we don’t we won’t get as good a product.

I’ve heard that the Wall E. Transforming Robot is a hot toy this year—the character from the popular movie. Wall-E arrives all tucked in and ready to wake-up from his rest cycle in Cube mode. Press both his arms and they release from the sides of his body, putting him in fully-poseable mode. Press another button and his wheels release. Whether it’s Wall E., Barbie, Hannah Montana, or Transformers, when toys become very popular, they may be in great demand, and some children find another toy substituted in place of the one they really wanted. And they may let us know that this is not the real thing.

I have a friend, who this year, decided to buy a white artificial Christmas tree—she said the sale at Big Lots was too good to pass up. She brought it home, they put it up and decorated it, and within a day, her husband told her maybe they could buy some auto air fresheners, the ones with the pine scent, because he really missed the real smell of the pine.

The last time I bought some gloves, to replace a worn-out pair, I found myself being taken in by a fancy name-brand. They may not keep your hands any warmer than the ones without a brand label, but somehow the name on the edge of the glove makes you think it’s a better product. And, many of us have lots of experience comparing generics to name brands, whether it’s aspirin or blood pressure medicine or colas. Most times, we’re getting the real thing, the same product, it’s just packaged in a different way.

John the Baptist had no illusions. He knew he wasn’t the real thing, the genuine article. I think he saw himself as the plain old generic model. The Gospel of John, in comparison to the other Gospels, doesn’t say anything about the quirky clothes John the Baptist wore, or the strange foods he ate. In this Gospel, he’s spoken of as a witness—a witness to the light.

“Some bigwigs are dispatched from the authorities in Jerusalem, to investigate the commotion in the hinterland. They inquire about John’s credentials, his pedigree, his authority for raising a ruckus among the people. These religious experts shined a bright flashlight into the face of John and demanded, ‘Who are you?’ He certainly didn’t act or dress or eat like anyone religious that they had encountered before. ‘Who are you?’ they demand. What is your denomination? Are you Calvinist, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian? And John answers them, by not really saying who he is, but by telling them who he is not. ‘I am not the Messiah.’ His interrogators regroup and ask, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ ‘Nope.’ Then, ‘Are you a new prophet?’ ‘Nope.’ No matter what they suggest, John says ‘No’”. They finally end up with an exasperated, “Well, then who are you? We have to take an answer back to those who sent us. Tell us who you are.” (William Willimon)

And that’s when John says, he’s not the one they really should be interested in. He’s just getting them ready for the arrival of Jesus Christ—the genuine article. By focusing on who John is not, we learn something of who Jesus is. John’s identity was related totally to the Coming One, to whom he was a witness. John came first, as the forerunner, but Jesus was the real thing. When asked about his identity, John didn’t say “I’m the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah” or “my professional objectives are thus and so.” He said who he was not, and then went on to describe his identity by communicating the centrality of Jesus Christ in his life.

John wasn’t recruiting people to follow him, but to follow Jesus. He shifts the attention away from himself to Jesus. He is pointing to the one who is greater than he is.

I'll never forget when a particular family in our church was having their second child. The first child went to the hospital the day after her sister was born. When all four of them were in that room, the older child made the statement "that it was all about her happiness." Given the birth of this wonderful second daughter, the first daughter wanted to make it clear that life was still all about her.

Especially at this season, it's not "all about us"—it's not about the brand names we think we must have or the traditions we absolutely must observe, for it to be a wonderful holiday for us. It's a season, perhaps like no other, that's all about Jesus. And we are the generic, everyday followers in our sometimes plain packaging, who should be pointing to him, and then getting out of the way.

An old story says that: "One cold evening during the holiday season, a little boy of about six or seven was standing out in front of a store window. The little child had no shoes and his clothes were mere rags. A young woman passing by saw the little boy and could read the longing in his pale blue eyes. She took the child by the hand and led him into the store. There she bought him some new shoes and a complete suit of warm clothing. They came back outside into the street and the woman said to the child, 'Now you can go home and have a very happy holiday.' The little boy looked up at her and asked, 'Are you God, Ma'am?' She smiled down at him and replied, 'No son, I'm just one of God's children.' The little boy then said, 'I knew you had to be some relation.'" (Dan Clark)

We appear to be some relation to God, when we reflect God's love into our lives and the lives of people around us.

Laying out under the night sky was always a treat for six-year-old Andy, especially when his dad was there to point out the Big Dipper, locate the North Star, and tell him a story about Arius. "Why is the moon so bright tonight, Dad?" "Because it can see the sun." "I don't see the sun. It's night time," Andy said. "We can't see it, but the moon is in a perfect position to see it. It's like a big glove in the sky catching the sun's light rays." "Is that why the moon is all lit up and we are in the dark?" Andy asked. "Yes, if we could see from the moon tonight, everything would be bright like day. The moon catches the rays of the sun and then throws them into the darkness to help people see at night." "Every person borrows whatever light they have from Jesus Christ. There was no light from John except what he reflected from Jesus." (Charles Spurgeon)

"He is the beacon that lights our way, the north star that guides us in the night, the lamp that's there so we don't stumble." (Edward Markquardt)

I once lived in a house that had skylights in a loft. One time melting ice formed into trickles of water, running down the skylight window. Those rivulets were reflected onto the side of the wall around the skylight. Without my glasses, I at first thought there was leak—that there really was water running down the wall. Yet, all it was, was a reflection. It wasn't really water, but it was an amazingly good imitation of water.

We need to be amazingly good reflections of the love of Christ in this world. And we need to be clear that we're not Jesus Christ, but hopefully something of him is reflected in us. "Like John the Baptizer, we are sent back into the world that is so full of darkness. We are to point away from ourselves and to the One who is to come into this world. And our job is to be a part of how God makes him known to others, by pointing to him. We take our cue from John the Baptizer, who faded into the background as soon as Jesus came onto the scene." (Jim Squire)

It's kind of like being the advance women and men for Christ. Andrew Greeley tells the story of a politician who once was running in a very close election against a very clever campaigner. He had a good message and an exciting platform, but he was not well known. So he had to make a lot of speeches around the district, go to many meetings, attend tea parties and receptions, cocktail parties and church gatherings, and touch every possible base in the district. It was still an uphill struggle. A good friend of his was his advance man, the fellow who made the arrangements for all the events and speeches and logistics for the campaign. But he was not a very good advance man—he was unreliable and pompous and worst of all, disorganized. The other people in the campaign couldn't stand him, but the candidate stuck

with his friend. As the election got closer, the polls showed the candidate losing ground. The advance man knew they were going to lose, so he gave up altogether. The campaign self-destructed in the last week. Yet the candidate lost by only one half of one percent of the votes. All the media people said that if the campaign had been better organized, the voters would have gotten to know the candidate better and he would have won easily, but he had an ineffective advance man.

The question is, are we effective advance persons for Jesus? Is his life reflected in us enough, that others might catch the light and want it for themselves? Even though John the Baptist was just a regular, generic kind of guy, the story tells us that he wasn't "just any man, but someone who was sent by God. That could be us, too. And what name will we call ourselves, when somebody asks us who we are? It obviously won't be Elijah, or the Messiah. It will be the ordinary name we are known by in the world—Molly or Henry, Alice or Joe."

(Kathleen Norris)

For it is we ourselves, who then point to the Christ, whose light and life are reflected in our lives.

--Sue Burwell

