

Advent 3B
Peace, Seattle
December 14, 2014
Isaiah 61:1-4, John 1:19-28

WHO ARE WE?

A favorite game of ours on road trips is a game called 20 QUESTIONS. You know that game?

The person who's "IT" thinks of something—and it could be anything at all...

- **natural or humanmade,**
- **factual or fictional,**
- **living or extinct—**

...and the task of the others is to figure out what that specific thing is in 20 questions or less.

**The trick, of course, is that each question can only be answered with a "YES" or a "NO."
No other details are allowed.**

Well, this week we meet John the Baptist at the Jordan **playing 20 questions** with leaders who've been sent to find out JUST WHO THIS JOHN CHARACTER IS.

WHO ARE YOU? they ask him.....I'm not the Messiah.
OK, WHAT THEN, ARE YOU ELIJAH?.....I am not.
ARE YOU THE PROPHET?.....No.
CAN YOU GIVE US A CLUE?..... I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness," says John,
"make straight the way of the Lord."

Instead of solving the riddle, John's answers seem only to complicate it.

And by the time their 20 questions are over, his interrogators are no closer to the answer they seek than when they first arrived.

John is not the Light of the World. He is a witness to the light.

John is not the Messiah; he is a voice preparing the way for the Messiah.

John is not the Word become flesh, but the one who points to the Word become flesh.

As we edge closer to Christmas, the question of God's identity and intentions for us unfold in our texts both in the person of John, and in the words of the prophet Isaiah.

So, what have we learned so far about who God is this Advent season?

- God, says Isaiah, is the One who brings comfort to his people...
- Who gathers into his arms like a shepherd gathers sheep...
- Who sends a Voice to prepare the way...
- Who comes into the wildernesses of our lives hurling promises as freely as the wind hurls leaves.

Who is God this Advent season?

- The One who enters the desolate spaces of our lives and taking hold of our hand, leads us through these deserts to a new place, where the ruins of our lives can be rebuilt, the devastations repaired, and the wounds of captivity healed.

STORY

A long awaited film will make its premier this month – the story of WW 2 veteran and POW Louie Zamperini. Zamperini's remarkable story, so powerfully told by author Laura Hillenbrand in her 2010 biography, UNBROKEN, will debut on Christmas Day.¹

Growing up a troublemaker in Torrance, California in the 20's and 30's, Louie made a turn-around when his brother Pete pointed out that he had a gift for running—a gift that eventually led him to all American honors and a position on the USA's 1936 Olympic team.

When war came, Louie enlisted in the Air Force and several narrow escapes was shot down over the Pacific. Drifting 2000 miles over 47 days in a life raft, Louie and his surviving shipmate finally landed on a Japanese controlled hellhole called Execution Island. And that's when the hardship really began.

Subjected to cruel treatment at a series of camps over the next several years, and to the especially brutal beatings by a sadistic guard nicknamed THE BIRD, Zamperini bent but would not break.

When the war ended he return to the States as a heroic survivor and tried to restart his life, but every night he was confronted by nightmares about THE BIRD that would not cease. He became convinced that the only way out of this trap was for him to return to Japan to face and kill the man who had been his chief tormenter.

Living out his fantasy of revenge was the only pathway Zamperini could imagine toward a future with hope. But as his life fell apart around him Louie discovered there was another way. (Spoiler alert)

Dragged by his wife Cyndi to a Los Angeles revival, he heard a young preacher named Billy Graham. The words of Graham's sermon that first night took Louie on an inward journey that seared his soul. Graham spoke of a drowning man and Louie, seeing himself in the image, grew more and more agitated and resistant. He was ready to bolt.

The next day, Cynthia coaxed a reluctant Louie into going again, and finally he agreed. And there, under the tent, he heard the gospel addressing him as if for the first time, felt it pulling together all the unbidden memories of his story of his survival, captivity and struggle, and God's hidden presence through it all suddenly became clear. A new chapter had begun.

Louie went to bed in peace that night and for the first time in five years, THE BIRD did not come into his dreams.

Newly captive to Christ, and his call to “love his enemies,” Louie knew that forgiveness, not vengeance, was the pathway that would lead him to wholeness.

There's much, much more to the story, and I encourage you to read the book or check out the movie to experience it.

The point, finally, for today is this:

Whether our lives resemble the epic struggle of a Louis Zamperini or a quiet journey of desperation; whether we've been stuck in the wilderness for years or just since last week, the God who meets us

¹ The biographical information which follows has been assembled from several sources: Laura Hillenbrand's book, *Unbroken: A WWII Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption*. (New York: Random House, 2010); from two online articles (edited), one by August Steigmeyer, which appeared in the *Kenyon College Collegian*; and the other by Michael Fleming of Deadline.com. For the full articles, follow these links: <http://www.kenyoncollegian.com/mobile/features/laura-hillenbrand-89-discusses-her-new-book-unbroken-1.1997896> and <http://www.deadline.com/2011/01/universal-buys-laura-hillenbrand-bestseller-unbroken-for-wwii-pic/>. The final source is the film entitled: *The Great Zamperini*, that aired on the final day of the Olympic games in Nagano, Japan, in 1998. The powerful 35 minute film, produced by CBS and narrated by Bob Simon, lives on now on YouTube in four segments: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxPuGQsmVEg&feature=related>

in the Scriptures, at the Font and at the Table, is the Word become flesh who enters our desolate spaces in order to lead us to a new place, and a new identity.

And as this process unfolds, as we step into the light and our wounds begin to heal, we discover that we start to define ourselves more and more by WHO WE ARE rather than WHO WE ARE NOT.

And as we tap into the energy that happens when we come together in community, we begin to discover that WHO WE ARE TOGETHER is greater than WHO WE ARE SEPARATELY.

And who are we? We a BOLD PEOPLE, not a timid people; we are a PEOPLE OF PURPOSE. Like John, we point to the LIGHT.

And as we discover this, as the Spirit breathes new possibility into the life we share in community, then the WORDS which Isaiah speaks today—the very same words Jesus used to launch his public ministry—become OUR words, too! Words that describe our mission and our purpose as a people going forward:

THE LORD HAS ANOINTED ME & SENT ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE OPPRESSED, TO BIND UP THE BROKENHEARTED, TO PROCLAIM LIBERTY TO THE CAPTIVES AND RELEASE TO THE PRISONERS; TO PROCLAIM GOD'S JUBILEE.

Advent is nothing if not a season of possibility.

Each step along the way brings us closer to the fulfillment of the wildest promise of all: that God will take on our very own flesh, move from infinite to finite, from the eternal to the temporal, from the ultimate seat of power to the utmost position of vulnerability, to bring LIGHT and HEALING to his precious/broken world. To make it unbroken.

Finally, it is this promise that God will take on human form and pitch his tent among us that gives meaning and possibility to all the other promises God has made to his people through the ages.

When we come to Christ's Table, God offers us a tangible taste of those promises.

As we receive Christ with the bread and wine, what once was loss becomes gain, what once was captive becomes free. For we have found our answer. And his name is Emmanuel.

Amen.