

## Advent 3B

John 1. 6-8,19-28

Sunday, December 13, 2020

Herd Immunity will surely be on the short list for the leading phrase of 2020. The idea that enough people will get vaccinated or contract the Coronavirus thus limiting its spread and, ultimately, eradicating the virus is a desired outcome that we can all resonate with. However, herd seems like such a plodding and passive term to use. If you've ever seen a group of cows meandering anywhere, you know what I mean. *Herd* is so beneath us! It's doltish and dullard. We're human, by God. Not some bovine horde! Furthermore, the concept of *Herd Immunity* connotes more passivity than action. Indeed, we are acted on--either by a virus or a vaccine--rather than *doing* anything that might be a game changer. Say what you like about cows, possessing agency is not one of them!

Which, in part, is what we desire most in normal times and certainly that which we desire in spades in times like this: Agency. When we lack control, when we are unsure of what each day will bring, when we feel flummoxed by the various curveballs life throws our way, we long for even an inkling of power that might alter our circumstances. During a recent podcast about the pandemic, one commentator referred to *Hive Immunity* versus *Herd Immunity*. You know, *Hive*, as in bees. For this person, the passive nature of the herd did not aptly capture what needs to happen for us to come out on the other side of COVID-19. Rather, the multifaceted and delineated work of bees in a hive was more apropos. Indeed, we do have agency. We *can* do things to change the course of the virus, infections, and the ultimate vaccine solution. And we have various roles to play. There are those working on the front lines, those providing care along a broad continuum, those providing logistical support, others managing their business or organization, and everyone masking, sanitizing, and distancing. The hive at work. The image was wonderfully piquant and poignant.

Moreover, it may be just the right image for our gospel text for today and the baptism that follows of young William Lombardi. We jump out of Mark's gospel this week to hear the familiar story of John the Baptist from John's gospel. The Baptist is the forerunner to Jesus. According to the text, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." Nothing too strange there. However, what follows is what can be described as a worker bee knowing his role. The scene that the gospel writer presents is almost humorous. Religious leaders come to John and ask, "Who are you?" We are told, "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am *not* the Messiah." So they ask him more questions, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you?" And John replies, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

I'm not the Messiah! I'm not Elijah! I'm not a prophet! Three times John is given an opportunity to step into a role and make something of himself or make something for himself. Three times John refuses to grasp that which he is not. How many people in his own day would have loved to bask in the attention of the religious leaders? How many would have loved to step into an opportunity due to mistaken identity? Furthermore, how many people in our social media saturated world would love to take up a little oxygen of notoriety, if even for just a moment? How many are seduced by the possibility of stepping into a role that they do not fit? If John agreed to being Messiah, Elijah, or a prophet today, think of it. A tik tok deal! A book deal! A made for TV movie! Or any other path to self-promotion.

Which underscores the beauty of what John does. He does not try to become something that he is not. Again, the classic worker bee. He has a job to do, and he's gonna do it come hell or high water or any overture to his ego. And this reality is the very heart of what William is invited into in baptism this morning, and that which we all are reminded of in our own baptisms. We are invited into life and to live the life that is uniquely ours and that God gives us and blesses us with. William is not called into the waters of baptism to be something that he is not. He is not invited into a world where he senses he is not enough, therefore he must run after the false gods and the pipe dreams of the next shiny thing that might give meaning but never satisfies. Rather, William and we all are given the promised blessing of God in baptism that he--and we--are enough just as we are. Loved. Treasured. Blessed. Thus, wherever William goes in life, he is freed to live more fully into who he is to be, not to scramble after something he is not. A promise that is also ours as well.

Thus, what we end up realizing is that *Hive Immunity* is not just a way of engaging a pandemic. It becomes the theme of our life together and inoculating ourselves against the baser aspects of our being--pride, vanity, jealousy. As Henri Nouwen noted in one of the reflections for our book discussion this week, "We have to give up measuring our meaning and value by the yardsticks of others." He further notes that when we do measure ourselves by others, compassion for them and for us becomes so much more difficult. The *Hive Immunity* of our life together is that in understanding our unique life and the unique lives of others, in being who we are created to be and not running after some other version of ourselves, we enter more deeply into compassion for ourselves and for each other at the same time. Which, of course, makes life possible. We are not immune from the changes and chances of life. We are inoculated from the isolation and indifference of the world, understanding that we are seen, known, and loved so that we might see, know, and love others.

Washed in the water of baptism, we are identified as the Beloved of God, claimed by God's grace and mercy now and forever, and called to live into the ministry that we each have been given. And, like the worker bees, our task is to live out that call, recognizing the diversity of ways that people live into the truth of their life and serve God and neighbor. We need not be

Messiah or Elijah, or prophet, or any other moniker. What we need to be is who we are called to be. For those here, that means *William*, and *Jessica*, and *Al*, and *Richard*, and *Paige*. For all the other names watching this service it means being you. For those participating in other services going on throughout the world, as well as all the other traditions that exist, the call is to be who you are. Be the you that God created you to be. Be the you that God loves just as you are. Be the you that shares your gifts with a world in need of such gifts. Indeed, when it comes right down to it, one of the ways that we prepare the way of the Lord is by claiming the life we have been given and living into the life that God calls us to be. Young William, welcome to the hive.