

John 1:6-8, 19-28
Advent 3A

Yesterday morning, we had a big scare when our dog, Sophie, escaped--
again--from the backyard.

Let me first make note that this was not due to a malfunction of Pastor
Dave's beautiful newly-built fence.

This was another issue in our backyard coverage that has now been
addressed.

We were all over social media, group and neighborhood pages,

Posting pictures of Sophie,

Asking for eyes to help search for her.

Social media is awesome.

Within minutes,

Someone had seen Sophie at 290 and Harlem (talk about scary!),

And within another hour,

A very caring couple had picked her up on the on-ramp to
290 (again. . .talk about scary!).

Dave and Owen went to go pick Sophie up,

And she returned home unscathed.

We are so grateful.

As Dave was on the phone with the Animal Care League,

The police departments,

The pet microchip database,

The first questions he was asked about Sophie each time
were,

"What kind of dog is she?

What are her features?"

Stuff like that.

Identifying questions.

And he repeated to each organization the same answers:

"Black lab mix.

Grey chin, 12 years old.

Hard of hearing."

He was asked to define Sophie,

And he did.

Without question.

People needed to know who they were looking for,

And Dave supplied them with the answers.

There's a certain part of our Gospel that intrigues me today.
When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to John,
Asking him, "Who are you?"
We hear that, first, John confesses who he is not.
"I am not the Messiah."
And when they ask him if he is Elijah or the prophet,
He says, "I am not."
The first confession,
The first testimony of John involves being quite clear about who he is
not.

If the animal care league, trying to help us find our lost dog,
Asked Dave, "What kind of dog is she?"
And he said, "Well, she is not a terrier.
She's also not a chihuahua,
Nor is she a German shepherd."
If he had said what Sophie was not,
It would've hampered the search process.
And it would've greatly frustrated everyone involved.
Which is what must have happened to the priests and Levites who
questioned John.
To a simple question,
They received a confounding answer.
A negative answer.
They were nowhere closer to finding out who this man was.

But for John,
Who he was wasn't the important answer.
For John,
Pointing to Christ,
Witnessing to Christ,
Was all he was ever called to do.
John points to Christ,
Even when others are pointing to him.
John points to Christ,
Even when he's asked to tell about himself.

When we can acknowledge who we are not,
We are free to be who we are.
So much of our world,
This season in particular,
Asks us,
Begs us to be who we are not.
Put on a smile this holiday,
Even though you may be grieving a great loss.
Do what you have to do to get that promotion,
Even if it goes against what you know is right and honest.
Just try to ignore any bullying or harassment you hear or see.
Don't be a troublemaker and call attention to it.
Go ahead, laugh at the demeaning joke,
Don't make a big deal out of it.
Avoid eye contact with the homeless person on the corner,
Or anyone else who isn't like you and doesn't have what you have.
You'll just feel guilty.

No.
You know who you are.
We know who we are.
And thanks be to God,
We also know who we are not.
We are not those who stand idly by while others are hurt.
We are not those who seek to gain favor and popularity at the
expense of others.
We are not those who refuse to acknowledge our fellow
humans and their suffering.
We are not those who are dishonest,
About others or about ourselves,
Putting on a fake smile when what we really
need is to be real with our community.
And though we are so often trapped by these worldly temptations,
We are not stuck in them.
We are saved from them.
We, like John says, are not the Messiah,
And that's our greatest identifier--

That we are not fit to save ourselves,
And we never will be.

This is why Advent, for us, is so beautiful and significant.

As Pastor Lyle said last week in his sermon,

And I paraphrase,

“How do we get ready for Christmas?

By acknowledging that we so desperately need it!”

We desperately need a Savior.

And because we have one,

A God who chose to come to us as one of us,

We also are not identified by who we are,

Or who we are not,

Or who we wish we could be,

Or who we wish we were not.

We are not left to ourselves and our human ways of sin.

In a flood of mercy and grace in our baptism,

We are washed,

Renewed,

Redeemed in water and Word.

And in this cleansing bath,

God--Emmanuel--has made us who we are--

A saved people.

And in this,

God has also announced who we are not--

We are not alone.

We are never beyond forgiveness.

We are never without hope.

All that we are,

And all that we are not,

Is because of who God is.

We are not left to ourselves and our human ways of sin.
In a meal of mercy and grace in Holy Communion,
We are fed,
We are forgiven,
We are united in Christ's body and blood.
And in this bite and sip,
God--Emmanuel--has made us who we are--
The body of Christ in the world.
In spite of all that we are not.
All that we are,
And all that we are not,
Is because of who God is.

For John,
And for us,
Claiming who we are not is key to knowing who we are.
Because we are not the Messiah,
We are the ones who get to tell others about him,
We are the ones who point to him,
And away from ourselves.
And in confessing who we are not,
We profess who our God is.