

Prophet, Priest, and King
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
October 22, 2023 PM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
John 1:19-28

The priests and the Levites came down to the river. They lifted the hems of their flowing robes as they stepped gingerly over the rocks and around the pools at the riverside. They took careful steps around the many muddy patches so that they wouldn't get their designer sandals soiled. They were sharp-dressed men and their clothes said power. They formed quite a contrast to the scraggly man standing knee deep in the river, clad in camel skin and growling about righteousness. These priests and Levites were on a mission. They were there to figure out who John thought he was. He'd been preaching down by the Jordan for several weeks and he'd gathered quite a following. People were starting to whisper that he might be the Messiah. Someone from the main office had to check this out and so they were sent to ask questions, three questions to be exact. Because, in their experience, it was always one of three people who these crazy religious men always claimed to be.

Did you notice those three questions the visitors asked John at the beginning of this passage? When you look closely at the questions, they're pretty interesting. These questions tell you a lot about the religious expectations of the people of Jesus' time, and I think they set you up for what will happen in the rest of the story. There are three questions about John's identity, because in the different streams of Jewish thinking of the day there were 3 different figures who were supposed to show up at the end time.

The first and most obvious expectation is the expectation of the Messiah. All the people were eagerly expecting the Messiah to come; that was the most popular expectation of the day. Everyone was expecting the Messiah and if a religious crazy showed up, he usually claimed to be the Messiah. In our story, the visitors from Jerusalem don't really get to ask John if he is the Messiah. Before they can ask he anticipates their question and he says: "I'm not the Messiah."

Now, what sort of a figure were people anticipating when they looked forward to the Messiah? They were looking for a king. The Messiah was a king. The Messiah was the great king who was supposed to come from David's line. He would restore glory to David's throne and beat down the enemies. Messianic expectation was especially high in Israel because this was precisely the sort of relief they needed at that moment. They'd been a captive people for as long as anyone could remember and so everyone desperately wanted a big strong king who would defeat the enemy and ransom captive Israel. People expected a liberating king, and John says right up front, "I'm not the coming king."

The second person they expected was Elijah. "What then, are you Elijah?" ask the visitors. People expected Elijah. Bible Quiz time. Do you know what the very last verse of the Old Testament says? Do you know what it promises? It's Malachi 4:5-6 and it says this: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse." Not only did the Jewish people expect a messiah to come, they expected Elijah to arrive. Elijah would arrive just before the day of the Lord and he would change people. He would turn them away from their sins and toward righteousness. That's still part Jewish piety today. At the Passover Seder it's tradition to have a place set for the prophet Elijah in anticipation of his return.

When people expected Elijah to come back, what sort of figure did they imagine Elijah would be? He would get people right with God. He would put their hearts right. They expected Elijah's work to be not just like that of a prophet, but also like that of a priest. A priest is a person who mediates between God and people, who stands between God and His people and by sacrifices and offerings and words, restores the relationship between people and God. The visitors raise an accusing finger: "Are you who you claim to be, Elijah, sent to re-connect people and God?" "No, that's not me either," says John.

The visitors have one more question: "Are you the prophet?" This is the third figure expected by believing Jews: the prophet. It all starts with Deuteronomy 18 where God makes this promise to Moses: "Then the Lord said: I will raise up for them a prophet like you, Moses, from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not

heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.” So the people were expecting a prophet like Moses someday.

What sort of figure did they think this Moses prophet would be? Like Moses, they thought that he would be a giver of the law. A great leader who would make God’s will clear to them, someone who would show them God’s law, someone to straighten them out. The visitors look at John the Baptist and they say accusingly, “Well, if you’re not the Messiah and you’re not Elijah, you must think you’re the prophet!” ‘Nope,’ said John, ‘I’m not the prophet either.’

The Messiah, Elijah and Moses. These were the expected ones. These were the anticipated figures, and the anticipation was great because each of these figures carried with them the promise that they would straighten things out in a particular sphere of life. Our enemies are overwhelming us and our leaders are a mess: Lord send us a king. Our hearts are fickle and we feel far from you. Lord send us a priest. Our minds are fuzzy. We aren’t sure of your ways. Lord send us the prophet. These expectations were not just abstract religious promises; they were deeply felt human needs.

When you think about it, these three figures still fit pretty well with our modern needs and hopes. You don’t have to be a Jew to be crying out for a perfect prophet, a perfect priest, a perfect king. You don’t even have to be religious. We all need and want these things. All human beings are looking for a prophet. We’re all looking for a person who can tell us what is right and wrong in life. Life is full of confusing moral choices. Life is full of places where we aren’t sure what is true and what is right, what’s ethical and unethical, what’s true and false. We want someone to come along and make it all clear for us. “Lord, show us your will. Show us the truth!” We want a prophet which is why people will give themselves to men who stand up and say with certainty, ‘I know the truth!’ people like David Koresh and Warren Jeffs and Ron Hubbard.

All human beings want a king. We’ve always been cynical about our political leaders, now more than ever. We don’t trust our leaders, we don’t like our institutions, we are always on the lookout for a new leader, some charismatic political superstar who we can trust, someone who will end corruption, who will restore our faith in government and bring us prosperity and strength. Even in a republic, we’re always hungry for a king, which is why people will throw themselves behind men like Hitler and Stalin. Some people have commented on how politics has become like a religion in our culture; that too is driven by the human desire for a king.

And we want a priest too. Our hearts are restless and unsettled, seldom at peace. We want someone who can fill up our spiritual hungers, who can connect us with God and show us the way of salvation, who promises us that they will show us the way to inner peace. Which is why people will fling themselves at gurus and swamis, it’s why they go to psychics and mediums, it’s why they will follow the latest new age trend that promises serenity. We want a priest.

John the Baptist resists all these associations. I am not a king who will cast out your enemies and bring perfect rule. I am not the perfect priest who will be the way to God. I am not the prophet who can answer all your moral questions. I am just a messenger. If you want the perfect prophet, priest and king, you need to look somewhere else. There is someone else coming, I’m not even worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals, but he is the one you should be looking for. John points to Jesus as the fulfillment of all three of these expectations. One of the great surprises of Christ’s coming was that these three different people expected by everybody turned out to be one person. It wasn’t three people who were coming; there was only one: Jesus. He was the prophet, the priest the king.

And in the rest of the gospel we will see how John’s words prove true. In the rest of the gospel of John, Jesus will be described in ways that show how he fulfills all three of these expectations. He will be the prophet like Moses telling God’s people how to live, giving them a new law. In John 13:34 he stands up and tells his disciples, “A new commandment I give to you! Love one another, just as I have loved you.” Jesus will be the prophet who proclaims and fulfills the law!

John will show that he is the priest too, the one who connects us with God. In John 8:19-20, while standing in the temple, while standing near to the places where the priests made offerings, Jesus told the crowds: “If you knew me, you would know my father also.” In chapter 6:46 he will say: “No one has seen the father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.” Jesus is the only priest who can truly bring us into the Father’s presence.

And at the end of the gospel John will show that Jesus is King. Pilate will bring Jesus out in front of the crowds and say to the crowds, more truthfully than he knows: “Behold, here is your King!” and on the cross over his head the truth will be written for everyone to see: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Jesus is our King.

So you see, these three questions asked to John the Baptist are very important. They set us up for the coming of Christ. They prepare us for the majesty of the man who will be revealed in the pages to come. All human expectations are met in Jesus. John is saying the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Jesus! In him all these expectations, all human hopes, all human dreams hold together. No wonder John says: I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandals.

I want to finish my sermon by reflecting on that strange sandal saying. You know that’s something John says in all the gospels? Every gospel records John the Baptist telling everyone that he’s unwilling to touch Jesus’ shoes. Why does he say that? The commentators will tell you that this has to do with the duties a disciple owed to his master. According to ancient documents, the rule in those days was that a disciple should be willing to do any task for his master except one: a disciple wasn’t expected to untie his sandals for him. That was a little too demeaning. In a society obsessed with cleanliness in a deep way, remember the laws about things being spiritually clean and unclean, shoes were considered really dirty, really viles as my Mother would say. So while a disciple should be willing to do all sorts of humble service for his master, sandal work was the one thing that was asking too much.

John the Baptist takes this old saying and turns it around. ‘You know how glorious this man will be?’ says John, ‘Even his shoes are too holy for me to untie.’ This prophet, priest and king was so holy, even his dirty sandals would be like sacred objects. You get the sense of glorious, untouchable majesty.

How stunning then that when this Messiah should finally come to earth, when the time came to show his glory, when the time came for him to be glorified, it was Jesus the glorious one who should untie our sandals. It’s all in John 13: “And then Jesus got up from the table, wrapped a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple’s feet. The one thing that was asking too much for a disciple to do for his master, and now the master is doing it for us. What kind of love is this? What kind of a prophet is this? Who has ever seen a priest do this? Has there ever been such a king? John the Baptist wasn’t there to see it happen, but if he had been, I believe that for the first time in his life, he would have been speechless.

What do we make of this? I think it shows something central about our Lord. Yes, he is mighty. Yes, he is The Prophet, The Priest, The King of Creation, but somehow his great power always comes in everyday humility and service. The power of the Lord will come wrapped in a towel with a wash basin in its hand and it will humble itself for us and for salvation. In that line about the sandals we come face to face with the mystery of the incarnation: eternal power clothing itself in weakness.

And maybe there’s also something in this about the way we act as agents of Jesus in the world. The catechism says in question and answer 32 that we share in the anointing of Jesus. We are prophets, priests and kings. We are here to be agents of the great Prophet, Priest and King. And we do that not by shouting at others that they must acknowledge Jesus’ kingship, not by accusing others of ignoring the words of the great Prophet Jesus, not by warning others that Jesus is the only way to salvation, but by washing their feet, by doing for others the one thing that that’s asking too much, by giving others more than they deserve.

All praise to Jesus Christ. We are unworthy to untie the thongs of his sandals, and yet he has washed our feet. Blessed are those who give their lives to him. Blessed are those who find in him their prophet, their priest, their king.

©Rev. Peter Jonker