

Sermon – John 1:6-8, 19-28  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
3 Advent – Year B  
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“I Am Not”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Especially this year, it is clear that I am *not* so many things. I am not preparing for an intensely busy Christmas Eve, capped off by worship in the middle of the night, for it will not happen. I am not planning to attend the Christmas parties hosted by friends from Grace and beyond, for such celebrations are off. I am not travelling, because there's nowhere to go. I am not, for the first time in my 45 years, going to see my mom or dad at Christmas, for we have agreed it is not safe or wise to do so; saying these words drives home just how much this year has taken from us. I am not going to have a normal Christmas and neither, I imagine, will you. Such is life in 2020, even with vaccines on the way. It is easy to focus on what we won't or don't have; we do it all the time. Perhaps I'm being pessimistic, but we humans have a predilection for seeing the glass as half empty. We look around, coveting the wealth, health, status, opportunities, or talent of others. We spend so much of our lives wishing we were someone else, even if it's only to wish that we were the sort of people who didn't wish to be someone else. To be content. Wouldn't that be wonderful? But we, in ourselves, are not. I am not.
2. *I am not*. Can these words, so focused on what isn't, become a source of hope, of life? Look to John and listen. Today we find ourselves near the beginning of the gospel narrative as John the Evangelist speaks to us of John the Baptist. He's been making a name for himself away across the Jordan. The priests and

Levites want to know who he is. Oh, they know he's John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah; they've pulled up his records at the Bethany DMV. But they want to know *who he is*. So, they ask him. Are you the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet? No, no, no. I am not, he says. So, who are you? "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Pressed, John has no interest in telling them anything about himself. The only thing he wants to do is point to another, to the One who is both Lord and light. John isn't the light; he just wants you to live in it.

3. In a society that demands an accounting from each of us, John's words are an invitation to a new way of thinking about ourselves. Are we merely an accumulation of accolades or a pyramid of pains? Is your identity located in you, or are you more properly seen as what you are not? The church's proclamation during Advent is about the Christ who is coming. *This means that you are not the Savior.* You are not the Christ. You are not the Light of the World. For the briefest of moments, this might sound like bad news. After all, the world – both without and within – demands that we achieve and succeed or, at the very least, keep it together for the sake of appearances. But John wasn't the Messiah, and neither are you. The bad news is that you're too far gone; that you, in your sin and suffering and death, are in need of a Savior. The good news is that you don't need to save yourselves. Jesus is coming; the way in the wilderness is being prepared. You are not perfect. You are not sinless. You are not eternal. And you do not need to be, for Jesus has come to be all these things for you, to gift all these things to you.
  
4. In Christ, we discover the bizarre freedom to be, to accept, who and what we are not. Our "I am not" is taken up by the great I Am; our emptiness swallowed within the Christ in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. Who we are is now forever about who Jesus is. What, then, do we say? What are we to do? Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones of Boston College asks the question this way in *The Christian Century*: "In a world that constantly

demands we say something about ourselves, what does it mean to use our platforms, our power, our privilege . . . to amplify something greater than our personal endeavors? To be an Advent people, not just pointing to Christ but living like Jesus is to come and is already here?" People of Grace, what would the world look like if we stopped focusing on what you and I are not and dreamed together instead of what we could yet become? What if our Advent expectation, focused on the Christ who has and will come, found its center in the Christ who dwells with us today, calling us to do more, to be more, together? Not in and of ourselves, but specifically because Jesus lives in us. There is so much that we are not. We are not people of peace or justice. We are not people who have learned to put others before ourselves. We are not people who have achieved racial justice or gender equality. We are not people who have learned to get out of our own way and let God be God. We are not these people. Not yet. We struggle even to find the words to speak about these things. But it's Advent; Christmas is coming. Christ is coming. We might yet get there.

5. We are not yet *there*, but this particular "there" is coming *to us* here. The Kingdom of God, that is. It is a Kingdom, thank God, that comes without any aid or assistance from us, a righteous reign of life that overcomes this world's sin and death through water and spirit. While 2020 has invited us to dwell upon all that is not, John calls us to focus on that which is yet to be. We may live in the midst of darkness and despair, but these will not have the last word. This Third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing. It reminds us that even while we wait, Christ is with us. And *that* is cause enough for joy. A joy that will never cease, Paul reminds us. A joy that is the surprising harvest of our tears. A joy that speaks good news to the oppressed and heals hearts once broken. A joy that need not be repressed, that cannot be undone. A joy to the world that lives because Christ is alive.

6. We are not who we ought to be, but Christ in us is who we need him to be. Advent is an invitation to consider these truths with honesty. As Martin Luther points out, your spiritual preparation during this season consists “in a thoroughgoing knowledge and confession of your being unfit, a sinner, poor, damned, and miserable, with all the works you may perform. The more a heart is thus minded, the better it prepares the way of the Lord, although,” Luther continues (perhaps with a sparkle in his eye), “meanwhile possibly drinking fine wines, walking on roses, and not praying a word.” Advent, Luther reminds us, is about accepting both who we are and who Jesus is, and finding peace and joy in the confluence therein. Our emptiness, our need, our *not* is not finally a cause for despair; it is an opportunity for God to act and for us to rejoice, wine and roses and all. I am not, but Christ is. That is simply enough.
  
7. Today is the Feast of St. Lucy, or Lucia. Martyred as a young woman during the Diocletianic Persecution of the early fourth century, little is known about her life other than that she lived a life of devotion to Christ and with generosity in his name. While the calendrical shift from Julian to Gregorian undid the coincidence, her feast day long fell on the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. Although she is loved by people around the world, it is for this reason she holds a special place in the hearts of Scandinavians, like me, who spend so much time in the dark. There, young girls dress in white with red and process with cookies or saffron rolls, wearing crowns adorned with lighted candles. We cannot all be Lucy. I could wear a flammable crown or try my hand at making baked goods, but I’m sure neither would end well. I’m also quite sure neither would make the world a better place. But you and I can reflect the light of Christ into the world; you and I can bear the invitation to the fragrant feast of Christ to the hungry of the world. You and I can see ourselves for who we are and what we are not. We can rejoice in who Christ is, and point to Christ so that others may see.

8. During this year, in which who we are seems to be missing so much, we are invited to offer this emptiness to Christ. Where we are not is where Christ is best. Invite him in; point to him that others may see. For in him we are not: We are not alone. We are not worried. We are not afraid. We are not forgotten or forsaken. Friends, we are not Jesus. But Jesus is. And he, the I Am, is coming to us. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.