SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 3 (B)
December 13, 2026

[RCL] Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Canticle 3 or Canticle 15; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Not Him

About ten years ago Dr. Johannes Haushofer, then assistant professor of psychology at Princeton University, wrote and shared online what he called his Failure Resume.

Dr. Haushofer has had plenty of successes: He holds two PhDs, he speaks three languages fluently and can converse in a couple more, he's won a bunch of awards, and he's taught at several top-notch universities. But, in his Failure Resume, he listed schools he didn't get into, jobs he didn't get, awards he didn't win, and journals that rejected papers he submitted. He said his reason for sharing this list of things he tried for but didn't get was to make his failures visible, destigmatize disappointments, and provide some perspective to counter the illusion of effortless success. He said people know their own failures and are likely to attribute their failures to themselves, rather than the fact that applications can be a shot in the dark, who gets the award can be a toss-up, and committees can have bad days.

Shortly after he posted his Failure Resume, people responded quickly with positive comments, calling it inspiring, beautiful, and brilliant.

But soon, others interpreted it as a "humble brag"—a statement meant to look humble but really to show off his achievements: *I'm remembering all those awards I didn't win while I look out my office window at an Ivy League university*. They said it was a way to show how much adversity he had overcome to get where he was; really, they said, it was self-promotion. Some people competed and criticized it for being too short: *He calls that a Failure Resume? You should see my failure resume!*

His Failure Resume did get a lot of attention. After a while, Dr. Haushofer added a line to the bottom of the resume: "This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work."

In today's Gospel lesson, we meet up again with John the Baptist. In the Gospel of John, we see him without any of the details we heard in last Sunday's reading from the Gospel of Mark. No odd clothing (camel's hair) or strange food (locusts and wild honey) that mark him as a prophet living off the land. In John's Gospel, it's almost as if the Gospel writer sweeps all those details aside so we can hear instead about all the things John the Baptist is *not*: He is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet, not the light.

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But this is no failure resume. No attempt to show us all the applications that didn't work or dreams that didn't come true. Definitely not a humble brag.

For one thing, John the Baptist never applied for those other jobs. Those weren't awards he wanted but didn't get. John knew there were no accolades in posing as Elijah, no prestige in impersonating a prophet, and definitely no merit in pretending to be the Messiah, or anything he was not.

All those "*nots*" the Gospel writer names for John the Baptist are not failures. All those *nots* actually show John the Baptist's successes (although he wouldn't acclaim his own accomplishments). They are three reasons why we're hearing about him today all these thousands of Advents later: He knew what he was not—and wasn't ashamed to say it; he knew what his real vocation was—and wasn't ashamed to do it; and he knew who Jesus was—and was adamant about proclaiming *him*.

John knew he was not Elijah, the Old Testament prophet whose return people believed would usher in the messianic age. John knew he wasn't there to tell people *someday* God will send the Messiah. And John most decidedly knew he was not the Messiah. That was someone else. Not him.

In a world of false messiahs and self-proclaimed saviors, John says, 'I am not the Messiah.' John wasn't tempted to pretend, even when people were saying that maybe he was the one to back. But he resisted. He wasn't curious to see if maybe he could use his influence, his moment in the spotlight, to do something good, even when people wondered if he was the one they'd been longing for. He wasn't seduced, allured, or inclined to please the people who thought 'maybe he's the key to our happiness, the one who can make things right, the answer to our questions, the one who can end our pain.'

"Are you?" they ask.

"I am not," says John. "I am not. I am not."

John knew who he was *not* and wasn't ashamed to say it.

John knew that his real vocation was to be a witness: not to be the light, but to testify to the light. Not just to say, 'one is coming after me'—but to say 'let me tell you about him. Let me point him out. I don't want you to miss him.'

Even when John talks about himself, he's talking about Jesus. He proclaims Jesus. He just gets started in today's Gospel reading: "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

That's why we still listen to John: the one who was not what people were hoping for, who did not get the job, the accolades, the awards. He knew who he was not. He knew his real vocation: He pointed to Jesus.

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We did not show up here in church this morning because we want to know if John the Baptist is the one. We did not come here because we wonder if maybe John the Baptist is someone we should follow, someone whose teachings can set us free, who can rescue us from our sins and shortcomings and confusion and sadness.

"I am not," says John.

But some of us may be here because we are wondering about Jesus. Maybe that's how you are reflected in John's words this morning: Jesus is one whom I do not know. Can someone tell me about him? Can someone shine some light on what this whole Jesus thing is about? Whether any of this is true? Worth hoping for? I don't know Jesus. Can someone introduce us?

Even those of us who would say we know him are aware we don't know him fully—not yet. Even those of us who call him our friend, brother, savior, Lord know we have more to learn. Even those of us who talk with him every day, who try to listen, try to follow, know we always keep ourselves a little at arm's length. Even those of us who want to be like him, love like he does, know we don't love as fully as he loves us. We know we sometimes miss him, even when he's standing in the midst of us.

But we live after John the Baptist. We live after Jesus's life, death, resurrection, ascension to God's right hand. We aren't left in the dark about who Jesus is. So if you are wondering about Jesus, you're in the right place. We can tell you where we have seen Jesus, met Jesus, eaten with Jesus, been changed by Jesus. We can introduce you.

John the Baptist knew that he was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. So, as we come to the end of this homily, let's add the next verse onto our Gospel reading—the one where John gets to do what he came to do: "The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'"

Now it's our turn.

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