

**John the Doppelganger**

AtG#3

December 17, 2023

Scripture: John 1:6-8 and 19-28

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world...

<sup>19</sup> This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup> He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup> And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup> He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

<sup>24</sup> Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" <sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." <sup>28</sup> This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.



Have you ever been confused for someone else? Or have you ever looked at someone from afar, recognized them, decided to go over to say hello, and then realized last second that it

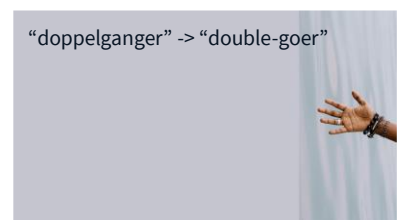
wasn't who you thought it was? Or... have you ever been confused for something that you are not. For example, I've been a Vikings fan since I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Every once in a while, when I'm using my wife's Packers duffel bag, I get accused of liking the Packers.

Today we turn to John's gospel as we enter the third week of Advent. Please turn with me to John 1 as we begin this time together. As we do so, let us pray...

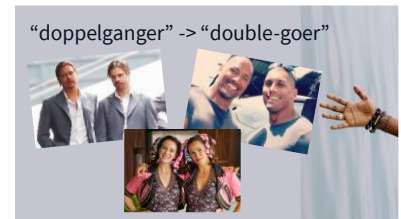
Now, before we jump into the doppelganger aspects of our text for today, let's look at verses 6-9. If you look at verses 6-8, they recap parts of the last two weeks from Mark's gospel, just in John's style. I love how John opens his gospel. It is very much like Mark's in the sense that there are no angels, no shepherds, no Elizabeth, and so on. These opening words are poetic and beautiful. I encourage you to sit down to read verses 1-18 one day this week when you have just a little time to spare. These verses remind us that John the Baptist was sent from God and that he came to testify to the light (to Jesus). John's gospel also reminds his readers that the "*true light*" was coming into the world.

There are times when it is important to remind ourselves and others of the light. This is especially true in this Christmas season. We all know people who are lonely, who are grieving, who are in need of light and love. These feelings are elevated or exacerbated during this season when everyone else seems happy and joyful. If you are having a hard time, let others know. Seek out your brothers and sisters in Christ. Talk to me. My friends, this can be a really hard time of the year for some of us. Take the time to notice others, to seek those out who have recently experienced a loss or other unwanted change in their lives.

Perhaps you have heard the word "doppelganger" before. But just in case you have not, this German word literally translates to "double-goer." The modern version of this that came to mind for me right away was stunt doubles.



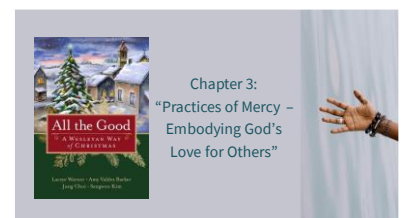
The double does the dangerous things that we'd dare not let the real star do. But the double makes us think that it really is the star flying through the air or tumbling down the mountain. Here are a few examples of some actors and their stunt doubles. At first glance you might think both are Brad Pitt, for example. But on closer examination one realizes that the one on the right is the "real" Brad Pitt. Or is it the one on the left?



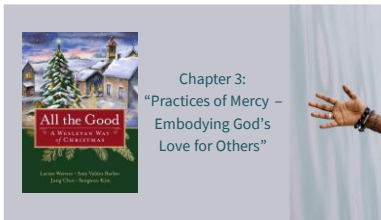
In the gospels, John the Baptist is Jesus' doppelganger in many ways. The actions of John the Baptist confuse those around him – to the point that many think that he is the One.

John was preaching repentance, he was drawing lots of people to him, he had some disciples, he baptized people, he was leading them to turn their hearts back to God. By most accounts, John the Baptist was pretty Jesus-like.

As we consider what it might look or be like to be Jesus-like, let us turn now to this week's Advent devotional, where we find a great example of the humble servant attitude that represents Christlikeness. Author Jung Choi roots chapter 3 in Mary's *Magnificat*, found in Luke 1:46b-55. Turn with me to Luke 1 as we dive into Mary's example. Turn your attentions to the screens as we hear the passage read. Or you can follow along in your Bibles or on your phone or iPad.



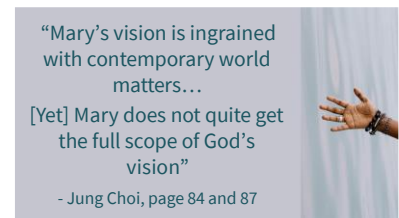
[Video: "The Magnificat" – 1:12] – then on to Part 2 of PPT!! (It should auto-advance.)



Chapter 3:  
"Practices of Mercy –  
Embodying God's  
Love for Others"

In this sung prayer and in Mary's "fierce and bold obedience" to God, as Choi describes it on page 82, we find a model of a humble servant's faith. Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel as she received God's invitation earlier in Luke 1. In response, Mary actively proclaims, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38.) Mary's fierce and bold obedience comes from her strong relationship with God and from her deep trust in God's plan for her life.

Author Jung Choi also talks about how Mary's song is a song of both vision and prophecy. Mary sings of God's preference for the lowly, for the hungry, for the marginalized of society. She sings of God's preference for 'the least of these,' over and above the "*powerful*" and the rich. Jesus' ministry will reflect Mary's beautiful song. And it will go one step further. Choi notes that even though "Mary's vision is ingrained with contemporary world matters... [Yet] Mary does not quite get the full scope of God's vision" (page 84.) Mary's vision is limited. Choi goes on to note that this is pretty typical - we humans seldom fully get or understand God's vision for our world. I do not know about you, but often I too fail to see the full scope of God's vision and plans for my life and for our church and for our world.



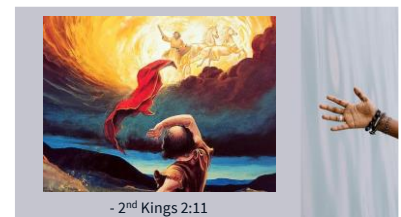
Yet when we turn to Jesus' ministry as found in the gospels, we see Mary's limitation is fully overcome in her son's ministry to 'the least of these.' Jesus loved, valued, engaged, cared for the outcast, for the lowly, for the hungry, for the marginalized of society. My brothers and sisters in Christ, we too are called to model Jesus Christ's example of a humble servant.

We too are called to look to and occasionally live on the fringes, to the edges, in order to also minister to the least of these.



As we turn to the second half of our gospel passage, beginning in verse 19, I have a few questions to ask to frame this time. First, have you ever had someone question your faith or your motives or even your place to talk about matters of faith? Have you ever had anyone ask, “What’s in it for you?” In our world where hardly anyone does anything for free, never mind out of the goodness of their heart, many people are skeptical when you do something just because the Spirit or our faith prompted you to. This is all part of what John the Baptist was dealing with. In addition, droves were coming out to see John, almost as many were being baptized, so there was certainly some jealousy, some confusion, and likely some envy driving this exchange.

In verse 19, the religious leaders send some priests and Levites out to question John. These men were regular temple employees, so to speak. They ask John, “*Who are you?*” John is straight-up honest, answering the question that they were really wondering about. In verse 20 he states, “*I am not the Messiah.*” So they press on, asking, “*What then? Are you Elijah?*” John the Baptist is no ordinary Joe. If he is not the Messiah, then he certainly must be someone. Elijah is a great first guess. The religious leaders of the time and all devout Jews believed that Elijah would return one day. He did not die in the normal sense but was taken up into heaven in chariot of fire after crossing the Jordan. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:11, Elijah and Elisha were walking along. Fiery horses pulling a fiery chariot appeared, taking Elijah “*to heaven in a windstorm.*”



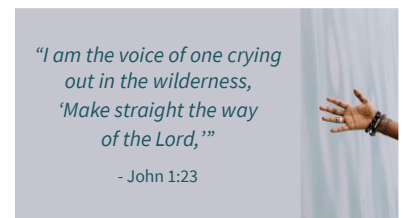
This happened right there where John was baptizing people. Since Elijah did not actually die, but was simply taken up, it was a logical thought that he might have returned and began to call people back to God once again, as he had been doing some 800 years ago.

So we must pause now and ask: Why do they think John the Baptist is a prophet? What is the evidence? Many people were leaving their experience with John thinking they'd encountered someone different, someone with power, someone with authority, someone not like their religious teachers in the synagogues and even in the temple. So it was not really a big leap to think that this might be the Messiah instead of some doppelganger.



The religious leaders had sent priests and Levites - the temple staff - to quiz John. If not the Messiah, ok. But they still needed an answer, so they press John, seeking something to report to their bosses. In response, John echoes words of

Isaiah 40, the words of these past two Sundays. In verse 23 John states, *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"* As I ponder this response,



I ask: Do we hear these words for ourselves? Even as John the Baptist speaks these words to the religious authorities, he also speaks these words to us in this season of Advent. Do we hear this voice calling out, inviting us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ child?

In verses 24 and 25 we learn that it is the Pharisees who have sent the questioners. This is interesting because the Pharisees are not Levites, they are not part of official temple staff. They are a group of laymen and scribes that became a religious force over the last 150 years or so. Even though lacking in official religious standing in some ways, they are still very influential in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body. Continuing to press John they say, if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or some other prophet of old, then why do you baptize? They are really questioning John's authority, his standing to be doing this. He is not one of them. He is not anything or anyone official. Yes, you might be kind of like the Christ that we are expecting, but...



You might have encountered something like this before. From time to time we all are questioned like this. It can have to do with our faith or with any other area of knowledge that we might possess. Sometimes it goes the other way too. We can ask someone, 'Who are you?' When might we or you, like the Pharisees, question someone else's credentials concerning matters of faith? In what situations might we question another's authority or credentials? It is an interesting thing to consider.

In our passage today, John is claiming these words from a most revered prophet, claiming them to be about himself. If not for the evidence, this would be a very bold claim to make.

In response to their questions, John echoes again the words from last week, but adds to them too. He begins by stating that he simply baptizes with water. But then he says this in the rest of verse 26: *"Among you stands one whom you do not know."* John is telling them that Jesus the Messiah is already among them. In fact, the Cana wine miracle has happened. John is implying "You do not know him."

At times, could others say this about us. There are certainly times when the living presence of Jesus is in our midst, and we do not realize it. There are times when the Spirit is right there among us, and we are clueless.

John then tells these religious folk, almost warns them really, that the one standing among them unbeknownst to them is indeed “*the one who is coming after me.*” John again points to Jesus' greatness, stating that he is totally unworthy to even untie the straps on Jesus' sandals. John declares that his actions are simply testifying to the one who is to come. As disciples of Jesus, we also should testify to the coming of Christ with our actions. So our question is this: how might we act as Jesus' doppelganger?...

One way that we act as Jesus' doppelganger is by practicing the means of grace. As we have talked about the past two weeks, when we pray and study the Bible and worship, we are growing in our faith, learning to love God more and more deeply. When we care for our neighbors, when we visit the lonely, when we meet the needs of the stranger, then we are growing in our love of God and of neighbor. In both the acts of piety and in the acts of grace, we are learning to be and to live as Jesus' doppelganger. May we live in such a way this week that people see Jesus in us. Alleluia and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow.* In the times when you've been 'accused' of being a Christian, how did this experience help you to grow in your 'fierce and bold obedience'? And if you've never been 'accused' of being a Christian...
- 2) *Pray.* As Mary sang, pray this week for 'the least of these' during Advent.
- 3) *Study.* Read Luke 1:5-25. What does this passage add to what we have been learning about and talking about concerning John the Baptist?