

“On Stage”
Zephaniah 3:14-20, John 20:19-31
April 28, 2019

Back when I was in grade school, if you flicked on your TV set after the nightly news and heard the music “Everything’s Coming Up Roses,” you could be pretty sure that Jack Paar was going to walk out onstage as host of NBC’s Tonight Show. That was one way you could easily recognize the program, especially if you weren’t yet 10 years old and already in bed. Chances are, you couldn’t hear what was being said on the TV from behind your closed bedroom door while you were half asleep - but the music was always recognizable.

When Johnny Carson replaced Jack Paar, much to my parents’ chagrin, not only did the music change with the jazz musician Doc Severinsen heading up the orchestra, but you could now hear the verbal introduction from a mile and a half away as delivered by Ed McMahon, who kicked off every show by saying, “And heeeeeeeeere’s Johnny!”

For some reason, a lot of people feel that it’s important to have something we can be recognized by, like a personal trademark or logo. I guess today they call that “branding.” Whether it’s a radio station with call letters, like WFCR, or a flag unfurled in the breeze like the skull and crossbones of the Jolly Roger, what is on display is meant to catch everyone’s attention because there is a recognition that we are now On Stage. Once upon a time American Express - the “don’t leave home without it” company - had some luminaries from the world of opera do some advertising for them. One version of the ad showed Roberta Peters (who died just over two years ago, by the way) half-heartedly complaining that even though she was an American coloratura soprano superstar, the person at the cash register often had no clue who she was - until she presented her American Express card. And suddenly, she was as good as gold!

Being identified while on stage is important. That’s why chefs have those funny looking white hats, some ministers have those funny looking white collars, soldiers show off a lot of shiny buttons, and construction workers wear their hard hats even when not on

the work site. The problem is, if you're not wearing your uniform, your hat, or if you can't find your credit card, or if someone doesn't say "Heeeeeeeeeere's Pastor!" everytime you walk into a room filled with people, will anybody recognize you? And what if they steal your identity and present a fake credit card?

Believe it or not, God himself has had a similar problem for a long, long time. Since the very beginning, people seem to have had some difficulty in figuring out who God was, where God was, and how you could tell if God was behind something that was happening to you. Adam and Eve made a dreadful mistake right in the Garden, all because they couldn't tell that the snake had no credentials for telling them what to do. The snake obviously didn't advertise itself as being an agent of his Satanic majesty; the snake merely claimed to have a slight improvement to make on what the Lord had been saying all along. Sounds reasonable, on the surface. It's like a double-agent feeding false information to the enemy during wartime, or any time for that matter. Or like a ship flying the wrong flag on the high seas (that's one definition of "fake news") until it opens fire right after it had hoisted its true colors.

Through the ages, God struggled with this problem of being pretty much unrecognizable until it began to dawn on certain Israelites that at the base of it, God was behind everything that happened. You had a good harvest? Thank the Lord! You lost one of your flock? The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

But that really didn't help anything at all, would it? We read in the Old Testament that biblical prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel warned about the false prophets who cried out that God was exclusively a God of peace. Sounds reasonable, until it was understood that God also had the power to visit punishments on all and sundry. In fact, we read in the story of King Saul and young David that when Saul tried to kill David with a spear, it was because the spirit of God entered into Saul. Yes, you heard that right - the

holy spirit of God entered into Saul, who was then moved to try to murder David. This could lead to considerable confusion. Was God the author of evil? Heavens forfend!

Despite the confusion, Israel was eventually able to come to certain conclusions about how to recognize God at work. This occurred largely through benefit of hindsight, to be sure, and the system wasn't fool-proof, but there was little doubt about a few things from Israel's history. God had brought Abraham to the Promised Land. God had saved his people from famine in the Land of Canaan by providing for them in Egypt. God had brought them out of the House of Bondage with signs and wonders when they crossed the Red Sea to return to the Land which he had sworn to their forebears. God's home - or at least his foot-stool - was on Mount Zion. And even if God should scatter Israel to the four corners of the Earth, God would bring them all back together in the last days to Mount Zion in the land that he had promised them.

Thus the grand outline of what we now call Salvation History was discernibly clear. And that is how Israel has recognized their God. As the prophet Zephaniah put it in today's Old Testament reading, the Lord has taken away judgments, he has cast out the enemy, he is in the midst of thee. He is mighty to save, and will rejoice over you. In other words, good things ultimately come from God to God's people.

But as I said, the system wasn't fool-proof. So, not too long after Zephaniah wrote those words, some one else was having a bit of trouble recognizing God. We know him as Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Thomas, level-headed man that he was, simply could not believe the claims of his own friends that Jesus had somehow come back from the dead and returned to his people. It took the hands pierced through, the side where the sword had been run, to convince Thomas that his friends had been right, that they had seen Jesus, and that he was alive once again.

And so the spirit of Thomas, always present today, is easily recognized anywhere. Wherever doubt is on stage, or we see a bit too much self-centered thoughtlessness, or an excess of skepticism, we say there's "Doubting Thomas." I wonder if that is not a bit

unfair. Does anyone say there goes “Denying Peter” or for that matter, check out “Befriending Andrew” or make way for “Loving John”?

But most importantly, what about you and me? How are we recognized? Most of us here profess to be Christian, to be followers of Christ, in whatever way we have come to understand that term over the years. Can anyone else recognize us as Christian? We are always on stage, as it were, and as such we should be easily recognizable.

I’ve heard reference on the radio made about some people who would not work at a Tag Sale on a Sunday - they were termed Religious Fanatics for daring to keep the Sabbath as they understood it. Pope John Paul II forgave a man who attempted to assassinate him ... and the media accused the pope of grandstanding by using religious dogma shamelessly for cheap public relations gain. Does anyone here remember Charles Colson? He once said that he would rather run over his grandmother than betray President Nixon. Then when he repented and declared himself Born Again, the media accused him of religious hypocrisy: clearly no “friend” of Richard Nixon could be converted, much less believed. After all, a leopard could never change its spots, and Christianity could never bring any fundamental change to the lives we live - you are who you are. Or so “society” claimed.

With examples like this, maybe more than a few of us don’t want to be readily and easily identifiable as Christians. How comfortable would YOU be sharing the stage with Chuck Colson? In many ways, our label “Christian” has not had a good press. And yet we are called to be the salt of the earth, the light on the hill, an example to all around us. Our credit cards don’t carry any religious identification, we have no uniform to wear that will make us stand out - unless it’s a funny clerical collar. However, we DO have the spirit within us as promised by God himself, assuming that we are crucified to self, to borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul. But how identifiable would that make us?

There is an old Sufi story about about a soul that presents itself for admission to Paradise. This soul is arrayed in brilliant white garments, its face shining radiantly in

untouched and uncompromised purity. But then this soul is asked by the Divine Voice: “Where are your scars? Where is the evidence of wounds sustained in spiritual battle? Have you ever truly confronted evil? Why are there no signs of care for your fellow man etched into your face?” When the soul has nothing to reply, the Divine Voice then asks, “Do you mean to say that you found nothing in life worth fighting for?”

Maybe we should let a little less of ourselves get in the way of that spirit divine, and allow it free reign in our lives, no matter what the cost. For truly then, when the spirit of Christ shines through us, scars and all, God will be discernible within us, helping others to see that the glory of Christ is front and center in our lives, on stage, to be recognized by all ... through which they can more easily recognize that God, indeed, dwells among us.

Let us pray: