

## Pointing to Christ

The book of Genesis opens, “In the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” There was complete darkness, then there was the voice of God speaking light into being. Before the light, there was a voice calling out.

Two thousand years ago, the people of Israel were in darkness. The land of Judea was occupied by the powerful Roman government and military, and the people were terribly oppressed. For generations, they had been hoping for, and waiting for a Messiah, a powerful leader who would deliver them from oppression, and make them powerful as a people and a nation. It was a time of darkness and had been for years.

Christians tell the story of what happened. We believe that Jesus Christ came into the world, a light for Israel and for all people. And as in the beginning story from Genesis, before this light appeared, there was a voice. It was John the Baptist. A voice calling out in a time of great darkness. A voice who bore witness to the light that was about to be given to the world.

For the second week in a row, we encounter John the Baptist in our gospel lesson. John was an astonishing figure. As we heard last week, he lived in the wilderness, out on the edges. He wore rough clothing of camel’s hair, and he ate wild food of locusts and honey. John preached boldly to everyone who came out to listen to him, and he called the people to be repent and be baptized.

The people in Jerusalem tried to figure out just who John was. He came on the scene with such power, and energy, and he began attracting crowds of people who came to hear his message of repentance and receive baptism in the Jordan River. The hope for a Messiah was widespread and had been for years. When John the Baptizer arrived, there were many who believed he might be the one. So, some of the authorities from Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and asked him about it, John answered them plainly that he was not the Messiah.

They then asked the next question, “Are you Elijah?” Elijah was the great prophet who worked miracles and was taken up into the heavens in a chariot of fire, and

horses, and a great whirlwind. There were those who believed that Elijah would return on day; perhaps this was him. But no, John was not Elijah.

So, they asked, “Are you, then, the prophet?” The prophet is a term that may have referred to a passage in the book of Deuteronomy, describing the coming of a great leader, a prophet like Moses was. No, John was not the prophet.

John was not the Messiah, or the prophet, or Elijah. So, the authorities, somewhat exasperated, asked, “Then who are you? Let us have an answer! What do you say about yourself?”

John says simply, “I am a voice. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” That is how John describes himself: a voice calling from the wilderness, from the darkness. This is what we heard in our gospel reading this morning, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” That was John’s role, to be a voice, a witness, not to himself, but to the One beyond himself. A voice pointing to the light who was to come, the Christ, the Messiah. John denies all honor to himself. His task is point to another, to Jesus. Later in the Gospel of John, the Baptizer declares, “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

There is a famous work of art called the Isenheim Altarpiece; it was painted by Matthias Grunewald, a sixteenth century painter. Perhaps some of you have seen pictures of it, it is the scene of the crucifixion. Jesus in on the cross and next to him on the left are Mary, the mother of Jesus, John, the beloved disciple, and Mary Magdalene. To right is John the Baptist, with a lamb, shown standing at the foot of the cross, facing the viewer, and he is pointing to Jesus. The presence of the Baptist in the picture is not historical, because John’s death took place long before the death of Jesus. His presence in the painting is symbolic, it illustrates the role John *always* had: to point others to the one who was greater, to the Christ.

John’s was a voice, spoken in the darkness, to tell us that the light was coming. John is a kind of watchman, standing on the hill, looking east, and telling others when it is almost dawn. While people are waiting in darkness, this is a vital role. It tells us that what we are hoping for, and longing for is coming. John knew the Christ was near. He said, “Among you stands one whom you do not know. This is the one who is to

come, the one I am pointing toward.” The time is not yet here, all is not yet fulfilled, but the One we are yearning for and hoping for is already among us.

In a number of old churches that I have visited, I have seen a little plaque on the shelf of the pulpit, placed where the preacher can see just as she or he is about to offer the sermon. It is a quote taken from the Gospel of John chapter 12. The little sign simply reads, “We would see Jesus,” or “We wish to see Jesus.” We have a simple sticker here on our ambo at All Saints with those same words That is what John did. As compelling as the Baptist was, he believed that the one people needed to see was the Messiah. And that is where he pointed, that is what he spoke about. Not himself, but the Christ. I am here just to point the way to Jesus.

And that is to be the mission for all of us in the Church – as individuals and as a community. We are to point toward Jesus. In seeing us, people should be better able to see the Christ. There is an ancient eastern proverb that God is like the moon, and everything else is like fingers pointing to the moon. God is like the moon, and things like the Church, the liturgy, the Bible, the prayers, they are all fingers; their role, their purpose, is to point toward God. Too often in the Church, we spend our time and energy arguing over and focusing upon the fingers. In recent years, there has been a lot of talk in our church about Episcopal Identity, and how we need to think about and talk about our Episcopal Identity. Over the past year or so, I have noticed a renewed focus around that in our Diocese. I have been a priest for 28 years, and so I speak with some experience. Far too often, talk of Episcopal Identity ends up being just a bunch of church people sitting in a closed circle, talking about themselves, and pointing to themselves and their church. Frankly, I don’t think the rest of the world cares about Episcopal Identity, or Methodist Identity, or Presbyterian Identity or the identity of any other church.

I love the worship of the Episcopal Church, I really do. But the point of liturgy and music is not to call attention to itself, but to God. It is only a finger that points towards that which is greater – *that* is what worship is to be about. I love the Book of Common Prayer, and I pray with it every day. But our job as Episcopalians isn’t to show people how wonderful our prayerbook is, it is to show others the transforming power of God. Our prayerbook, our beautiful vestments, or any other Episcopal thing is meant always to be a humble, useful finger that points toward God. We are not called to draw attention to ourselves as a church. At best, we can give thanks for what our church offers in pointing the way toward God. Like John, our job is to

prepare the way, and point the way. We are not supposed to stand *in* the way or imagine ourselves to *be* the way.

This is a dark time in our world. The world is hungry for peace, and light, and hope. People are hungry for what God can give. People wish to see Jesus. If, as the Episcopal Church we can help people see Jesus, then we will be doing all right, we will be doing God's will. Like the Baptist, our mission is to point to Christ, to the one who is greater, to the one who is coming, and to the one whose presence is already among us.

We point to Christ by being trying to live faithfully, by following Christ. We don't have to wear camel hair clothing or eat locusts or be a wild man or wild woman like John the Baptist. We are called to witness to Christ in our own day, within our own story. To share the good news in word and example. To be a small and faithful light, created by and always pointing to the great light. Amen.

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Trace Browning

Advent 3B – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 • Psalm 126 • 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 • John 1:6-8, 19-28

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