

**December 14, 2014**

**TEXT: John 1:19-27**

**TITLE: The One Whom You Do Not Know**

Why do we need John the Baptist? Why don't we simply skip over him and focus solely on Jesus? OK - that sounds like a disrespectful statement to make about an important biblical prophet. I'm pretty sure it is not something we would say to John the Baptist's face. If the doorbell rang and we opened the front door and saw John on the steps, we wouldn't push him against the railing saying "Get out of the way; we're waiting for Jesus." But then again, that's what we do all the time. We relegate John the Baptist to one week in Advent, while for the rest of the year we only want to talk about Jesus.

The truth is we need John the Baptist. Why is that? Because there is much about Jesus we can't see unless someone prepares us. Now, at this point you may want to "push back" and say, "What do you mean? I'm quite sure I don't need John the Baptist in order to see Jesus Christ." I was hoping you'd say that, because now you are in the perfect mindset for today's gospel lesson. You and I are right with the priests, Levites and church leaders who interrogated John the Baptist long ago.

Finding this wild-haired prophet by the Jordan River, the first thing we do is ask John to show us some identification. "Who are you? Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? A prophet?" Only someone mentally unstable would claim to be one of those persons, and getting John to admit that much would put a quick end to his baptismal sideshow by the Jordan river. But our attempt at self-incrimination doesn't succeed. The last thing John is interested in is boasting about his own credentials. John makes no claims about his own status in the eyes of the world. It calls to mind the old saying, "There is no limit to what can be accomplished if you don't care who gets the credit."

However, the crowd questioning John, of which we are a part, won't let him off the hook. (Verse 22) "Let us have an answer. What do you say about yourself?" John's reply was this: "I am the voice – the one crying in the wilderness." Many of you have perhaps seen the TV show "The Voice" or have read about Chris Jamison, the young man from the North Hills who is a finalist on that show. The way the show works is that a panel of music stars initially sits with their back to the stage while a performer comes out to sing. They don't see costumes or appearances, race, age, beauty – they only hear a voice. They have to listen and decide, "Is there real talent here? Is this someone special or just another pop singer hoping to make it big?" Only if they believe in what they hear do the panelists turn around and see who is singing. "The Voice" is an apt metaphor for why we still need John the Baptist. Appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes real talent and real truth are only found when we listen with our hearts, and most of the time someone like John the Baptist has to remind us of that truth.

John has a three-part message: I am the voice – calling in the wilderness – saying ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’ He is the voice (Will we truly listen to him?) calling in the wilderness (re-naming where we are now as something wild and dangerous to us body and soul) saying ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ (reminding us that we’re not ready for Jesus at all).

OK, so we choose to listen to this voice. Must we accept John’s description of our world as a wilderness? Yes, in that we are commonly trained to see the world now in ways that maximize what is desirable and minimize what is negative or broken. A subtle version of this happens at Disneyworld, where if you ask an employee ‘What time does the park close?’, they are trained to reframe your perception by answering ‘The park is open until 10 pm.’<sup>1</sup> Casinos routinely avoid having clocks in them to prevent an awareness of the passing of time disrupt your gambling experience, just as the use of poker chips or credit-cards keeps you from remembering that real money is thrown away every time you spin the wheel or pull a lever.

A wilderness is a place where your view is constantly obstructed – you can’t see the forest for the trees, and often you can’t even find your way out of the forest. Try talking about the wilderness of racial justice, peace in the Middle East, or climate change. We have been trained to believe that the complexity of these subjects means they are too messy to sort out. We tell ourselves, ‘What do I know about grand jury proceedings, the tensions between Zionists and Palestinians, or the best way to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel?’ It feels too hard to wrap our heads around the realities of racism in America – the subtle-yet-cumulative damage we are wreaking on the environment – the growing economic disparity between nations in the world and zip codes in our own region. At some point we shut down; we shrug our shoulders and just try to get by as best we can – when suddenly John the Baptist calls out to us.

At that point, we have to decide: “Will I listen to this voice even though he re-names my world as wilderness?” Will I listen to this voice that challenges the ways we treat one another and see one another? We say to ourselves, “I’m not sure I want to think about these things at church on Sunday morning. I thought I was safe here inside these walls, with my hymns, my silent prayers, my typed order of service.” This last point is important to consider because that was the exact crisis motivating the questioners huddled around John the Baptist. These interrogators, sent from Jerusalem, demanded of John, “Give us an answer for those who sent us.” They were church leaders asking this outsider, “Why should we listen to you?”

Sadly the church is sometimes one of the last communities to recognize what makes for true justice. Which is why we need John the Baptist – and we need to hear what his voice says. When all the questioning was finally done, John said one of the hardest and most beautiful statements in the New Testament.

(Verse 26) *John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.*

John points to Jesus and names him "The One you do not know." Wait a minute, John – I just sent out three dozen Christmas cards with a picture of baby Jesus on it. I've got a portrait of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane on my wall and in my red-letter bible. He's carved into marble and painted on stained glass right there. How can you say I don't know him?

That is precisely what the voice calling in the wilderness tells us: You don't really know Jesus. And we are not alone in this condition. The gospel is full of examples of the truth of John's words. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and called him "rabbi" but in the end was totally confused when told he had to be born anew. The Samaritan woman gave Jesus water from the well, but she became flustered when he began to speak about the living water he possessed. Pilate called Jesus the king of the Jews, but then laughed when Jesus spoke about truth. And all the disciples, having walked and listened and ministered with him, ending up denying, betraying, and fleeing from the one they'd initially given up everything to follow. For all of them and for us, if we're honest, Jesus remains the one whom we do not know. He defeats our efforts to be tamed or boxed in; he overturns our tables and spoils our romanticized portrayals in marble or canvas. The real Jesus refuses to be marginalized, minimized or managed by us. The real Jesus proclaims a different order and a higher justice – not a rubber stamp on the status quo. John's task is to break that hard news to us so as to prepare us for even better news.

We are not called to know Jesus; we are called to follow him. And since we can't seem to find our way out of the wilderness we've made of our own lives and the world around us, we're stuck – except for the good news John brings us. The one whom we don't know but whom we sorely need is coming. Despite everything – despite selfishness and sin, despite addiction and injustice, despite violence and pain and wilderness stretching as far as the eye can see – Jesus is coming. John chapter 1: *The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He came to what was his own, though his own did not accept him. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.* (Jn 1:9,11,14) That is one of the most beautiful, comforting statements in the whole New Testament. When we cannot see our way forward, when we cannot hear what is true anymore, when all around us is a wilderness of our making and no answer comes easy, Jesus comes to us. Such amazing love, such amazing grace, such truly good news.

Anne Lamott tells an old Hasidic story of a rabbi who taught his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will tumble inside."<sup>2</sup>

What is John the Baptist saying to you today? What do you need to hear in your wilderness? What needs to break so that holy words can tumble inside and you can be at peace at last? We need John the Baptist. Someone to prepare us for Jesus, to be the voice we listen to deeply; someone to challenge our safe answers so we will finally seek and serve the truth; someone to remind us more than once a year that the One whom we do not know knows us, and He is coming and He is here. John knows that – and he will say it over and over again until we finally hear the Voice and turn around.

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture, 2008, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, 2005, p. 73.