

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Dec 13, 2020

Pastor Kelsey

John 1:6-8, 19-28

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" **20** He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." **21** And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." **22** Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" **23** 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.

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

Sermon

Gracious and Joy-bringing God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

The movie Inside Out makes the inside of our minds an animated control center, and at the helm are personified versions of the 5 core emotions: Disgust, Fear, Anger, Sadness, and Joy. Those 5 emotions inside a tween girl, Riley's mind, are really the main characters of the movie, mostly focusing on Joy and Sadness and the journey they go on together. One of the main lessons of the movie is that we need all of our emotions, and we can't just be happy, or joyful all the time. Specifically, that it is okay to feel sadness sometimes and that joy and sadness can come together and support each other in important ways. If ever there was a year for us to experience this lesson for ourselves, it is this year! We have all had to put in a lot of extra effort in a year such as this to find sparks of joy or hold onto joy when we do find it. We have all experienced, this year in particular, that joy and sadness can both happen at the same time, and sometimes it's important that they do. This is the kind of Joy that we are called to remember in Advent and at Christmas time. Not just a saccharine happiness with a lack of anything wrong, or despite the things that could bring us down. The Joy of Advent is a Joy that fully acknowledges the hard things and the sad things and the unjust things and does not ignore them or belittle them but declares that it is not the whole story. The light will always shine, no matter how big the darkness gets. Of course that light can be found in the happy moments with friends and family, in love shared and positive outcomes. But the foundation of all that joy, and the joy that remains when all else fails, is the joy we find in Christ. Again, not a happy-go-lucky, care-free joy, but a grounded, real joy that does not ignore sadness. Advent is a time that we especially think of the Joy Christ brings because of the importance of Christ's birth.

So you may be a bit surprised that the passage we read today doesn't say anything about Jesus's birth. In fact, the book of John does not tell us anything about Jesus's birth. No angel coming to Mary, no inn or manger, no bethlehem star, no shepherds or wise men, no King Herod. This first chapter of John does not tell that story but a grander story leading right into the first scene of Jesus's ministry that we read today, but yet still Jesus is yet to have his own line of dialogue. The book of John may not begin with the Jesus birth story we are used to hearing, but instead tells the impact of the birth of Jesus, with the cosmic Christmas story, the story of why Christmas is such a big deal, because it marks God becoming flesh among us.

The verses we have today tell us about John the baptist and what he means for the Gospel of John and Jesus's ministry as a whole. But where this bit about John lies in the book of John is equally important. Our verses for this morning come in two parts because they come in the midst of this grandiose explanation of who Jesus is. The first verses of John are probably familiar to you:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

A lot of people look at parts of John like this one, and say that the book of John, more than the others, really highlights the divinity of Jesus. This is true, but it means that people often overlook the ways that the book of John also deeply shows the humanity of Jesus. In fact, one of the main themes of John is holding together the humanity and divinity of Jesus at the same time. So, though this interjection in the midst of these grand ideas of all of time, light and dark, with "There was a man sent from God," isn't as random or misplaced as it may seem. This is an intentional juxtaposition of the grand divinity of Jesus and the very real humanness of Jesus's story on earth. The grandiose God of the universe became flesh and had such a human and divine entrance into the world that this one dude named John was the one preparing the way for him by word of mouth, the main message he had being, "No no no, I am NOT the Messiah. I know you heard me say Messiah in there, but I am NOT HIM. And no, I'm not Elijah or any prophet that comes to mind, I am only a witness to what will come. And he who will come is going to be so much cooler than little old me."

John's entire point in the passage we read today is to tell us that he, himself, is really important to the story of Jesus but not the most important. He is the one who points the way to the most important. Which is a key part of the story to remember during Advent as this is the time of preparing for and pointing to Jesus. Now, the important part is not just to point to Jesus like to point out that he exists. "Oh hey, so Jesus is gonna be this dude. He is coming. He is cool for no reason." The point of John's witness, of his pointing to Jesus, and what John models for us today is that pointing to Jesus means recognizing and sharing that Jesus is God becoming human, what that means for our relationship with God, and the light that comes from those two key factors.

This passage and introduction to who John is, is simple but says so much between the lines. In the beginning of this introduction, we hear, "He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." We know from further texts in the Bible and church tradition, that we too are to become witnesses to Christ in the world, giving testimony to Christ's light among us. You may be thinking of passages like Matthew 28:19: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Passages like these are often thought to mean that we need to evangelize to get people to admit belief in Jesus, to become “saved.” It becomes about one moment of conversion. Though in the book of John, it is not as simple as that. In the book of John, belief is not a noun, but a verb. In this Gospel, belief is not a knowledge point or opinion, but is about relationship. Believing in Jesus is about being in relationship with God in the way described in verse 18, one cut out of our reading for today: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” Belief is relationship, and relationship is possible in this way because Jesus became incarnate, was born, and lived a human life, a spectacular one at that, but yet still human. It is this life with Christ that John testifies to, John testifies to the hope and light of being able to have an intimate relationship with God no matter who we are or where we are, and does so, so that others may experience the light of that relationship in their own lives. So that others may experience that joy.

So far, I have been talking about all this in some big words and big ideas. I’ll try to bring it down from the stratosphere now. And I will be the first to admit that that may be a bit hard for me as someone who is still learning how to put my school learning into terms that normal people can easily understand. The joy and light of being able to be in relationship with God in this way, through Jesus is all founded on the fact that Jesus was and is God incarnate, or God made flesh, God made human. Our God saw the way that things were going was not working. God knew and wanted a different, closer relationship with all of us, so our big, all powerful, all knowing, all loving God did something crazy. God did not just send down God’s Son in a human costume or looking human, but not actually experiencing anything as a human would. God sent Jesus to be born as we are born, to grow up as we (or, well, as first century Holy Land people) would grow up, to have friends and bullies, to have physical needs and physical hurts, to have real emotions of joy and pain, of frustration and boredom, just as we do. Jesus grew up with parents, partly in exile and then in the peasant area of Galilee. So he grew up, most likely pretty poor. He grew up learning a trade as well as asking questions of the rabbi. He had to eat and go to the bathroom. He laughed and got hangry. He got calluses and had to bathe. He walked for miles and surely had a rock get stuck in his sandal and knew the irritation in trying to get it out. He got exasperated and was gentle. He performed miracles, but also sat to eat normal meals with many along his journey. He gathered followers and later was betrayed, he made friendships and wept when they died. In Jesus, our God experienced all that it means to be human. All the highs and lows. All the complexities and simplicities and hardships. Jesus GETS IT! Jesus brings this experience to God and the Spirit as sharing in the divinity of our Triune God. It is this God that we get to have in our corner and having our back. It is this God that we can go to with all that we are and all that we are feeling and share in it knowing that God GETS IT! It is this God that weeps with us when we are sorrowful, rejoices with us when

we are joyful, and hears our anger when things aren't fair or don't make sense. It is this God that transforms us and guides us and challenges us toward the ways that we can be better. And it is this God that does not want us to ignore or forget the sad things, the hard things, the unjust things, but also invites us to find hope and joy. This is the light that shines through all darkness. No matter what happens here on earth, God is with us, holding us, hearing us, comforting us, guiding us. We share that light with others as we share what that relationship has meant to us, and not just so that others can be saved and we can claim responsibility for that, but because that is a light that ought to be shared because it is important to our lives and we ought not hide the light in our lives. We can share the light through sharing the ways that God has worked in our lives and transformed us.

As John teaches us in this passage, the most important part of sharing the light is to be sure we always point away from ourselves and toward Jesus. We ought to do it on purpose, but sometimes we can point to Jesus without even meaning to.

Recently our church got to do that together in an unexpected way during our Blue Christmas service. We had an unexpected visitor that reminded me of the point of what we do as the church. One of the podcasts I listen to described it as WWJD, instead of What Would Jesus Do, WWJD What Would John Do. John teaches us to point outward and point toward Christ. So, we got to do that during our Blue Christmas service. By happenstance, a woman named Erin, from Maryland, who has zero connection to our church, found our Facebook event for a Blue Christmas service and joined us on Zoom. We introduced ourselves to her, and she to us, and she shared why she joined us. She was on with her mom, and they had just lost her dad 16 days before. So close to the holidays, they were feeling like they needed something to help them process that loss and the holidays. A Blue Christmas service seemed the perfect thing to try.

I still don't have any idea how they came upon Hopkins UMC on Facebook but somehow they did and they were a part of the service with us. It was a beautiful blessing as part of the other ways we were blessed in that gathering as we got to meet Aurora that day and we got to be with some folks that we don't usually get to see on Sunday morning. That said, Erin's visit was such a beautiful testimony to the ways that we can unexpectedly point toward Christ and the work of Christ in the world. And to know that this is still happening, even today, when we're on zoom and when things aren't normal and church is all wacky! But we never would have been able to connect with Erin and her mom from Maryland if it weren't for this way that we're doing church right now. It was a blessing for us and for her and her mom as their experience brought a realness to the need for services like the Blue Christmas service. For me, and I hope for everyone there, it was a blessing to experience that with Erin and with her mom and with each other as Hopkins UMC church family and have that moment to clearly see the way that we are pointing towards Christ in the world together.

So there was joy in being together for the Blue Christmas service. Was it a happy time? No. Well, except for getting to meet baby Aurora. But beyond that, we did not speak of happy times, in fact many shared their experiences of loss and grief. They shared the ways that loss and grief stick with us. Even though we were not smiling and laughing and dancing, even though many likely shed a tear or two, there was joy between us as we shared in grief together, as we lifted each other up and as we pointed to the hope in Christ together. We especially found joy as we got to remember why we do all this. Not just for ourselves, but so that we can bring this hope and joy and healing to others. So that we can share what relationship with God can bring. Perhaps this holiday season, one of so much loss and change and loneliness, it is this joy we can share with each other. Not a giddy or carefree joy. But the joy of the light not being snuffed out. Joy in the hope we have through Christ. Joy found acknowledging the sadness and embracing both this christmas season. Let this joy transform us and inspire us to be like John the Baptist and not just prepare the way for Jesus in our own lives but prepare for Jesus all around us.

Let us Pray.

Lord of Love and Light, shine through our darkness, bringing us hope. Open our hearts for the journey, our eyes for the light, our spirits for the peace which you bring. Fill our mouths with laughter and speech with shouts of joy that we shall reveal the love with which you surround us. We offer this prayer in the name of the One who is coming into the world bringing your hope, love, peace, and joy, Jesus Christ. AMEN.