

After four weeks of Advent waiting for hope, peace, joy, and love, yesterday, we finally made it to Christmas, our annual celebration of the day the Word eternal came in the flesh to dwell with us in the Christ child, Jesus of Nazareth. Last Sunday, Pastor Ryan kicked off our journey through the gospel of John. He read us the prologue at the beginning of the gospel, which comes in lieu of a nativity story in John. Rather than opening with a manger, the gospel of John presents the divine origin story of the eternal Word of God that was in the beginning with God, that held life within itself and gave it as light to all the people, shining so brightly that the darkness could not overcome it. The prologue spoke of a man sent from God, John, who was not the light that was to come into the world, but who came as a witness to the light, that others might believe. We of course, know that the gospel is setting us up to meet Jesus, the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us. With heavy handed foreshadowing, the gospel suggests this work of preparation was essential because even though the Word was so intertwined with the world, the world didn't recognize him. We remember that John's gospel was mostly written by and for a generation of Jewish Christians whose developing beliefs had begun to so greatly diverge from traditional Judaism, forcing them to need to leave the synagogue. Perhaps because of that exodus, the prologue adds in the stark reminder that the Word's own people didn't even accept him. This first Sunday of Christmastide, we pick up the narrative immediately following the prologue to learn more about that skepticism in the religious establishment and the role of John the Baptizer, the witness to the Light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' 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. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.' (prayer)

With a baby on the way, knowing our vacation days are numbered, a few weeks ago, we seized the moment for our 4-

year-old and masked up to take Robby to Disney World in the safest way we could manage in a global pandemic. Anticipating that trip, we introduced him to a few Disney classics, and predictably, he fell in love with the movie *Toy Story*. Towards the end of our trip, Robby bravely insisted on riding his first proper junior roller coaster, *Toy Story's Slinky Dog Dash*. He loved it and has been wanting one of those classic 1957 Slinky Dogs ever since. Yesterday, thanks to his grandmother, Robby got his wish. All day, he dragged Slinky Dog around the house, asking us if we wanted to pet him, treating him like a real dog, even tucking him into bed with him last night. At one point, he asked Ben to pet the dog, but then leaned in and mischievously asked him to pull its tail instead. Ben complied, because we are clear on who rules the roost at Casa Davis. Always ready to play the hero, Robby rushed to scoop Slinky up and dramatically comfort him. Then ensued a long role play in which we weren't allowed to pet the traumatized Slinky until Robby had taught his dog to trust strangers again. I took two things from that hero role-play. First, clearly, the goldfish isn't cutting it, and my son needs a pet. But also, I couldn't help but notice the pride and love on Robby's face as he rushed into the role to rescue Slinky. I recognized it because leaders in the church often aspire to be heroic rescuers. We are fixers and do-ers. We like to be helpful and care for others. Many of us accept the calls to ministry because we genuinely want to tend the flock, like Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who cares for us all.

Frankly, I think that is what the Jewish leaders, the delegation of priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem were doing in today's text, checking in on John who was baptizing folks in the wilderness, continuous with, but beyond the bounds of the ritual purity immersions offered in the holy Temple complex. They were being good

shepherds, gate-keeping, heroes trying to make sure their folks weren't being led astray by a charismatic fur-wearing, locust-eating, wilderness-dwelling, maniacal Elijah-wanna-be, heralding in a false Messiah. So they go to investigate, asking him who he is. Interestingly, John knows their assumptions about him and cuts to the chase, answering with who he is not, "I am not the Messiah." There is strong contrast here to the name for God that Moses gets in Exodus, "I am," and all the metaphorical "I am" titles Jesus will give for himself in John's gospel. The priests ask John if he is Elijah or the prophet, which John says he is not. The religious leaders keep pressing for some answer to take back to the Temple Pharisees, finally asking an open-ended question, "Then what do you say about yourself?" John cleverly recalls Isaiah, saying he is the voice in the wilderness crying for all to make straight the way of the Lord. They insist that if he isn't the Messiah, Elijah-returned, or a prophet, that he has no business baptizing others. John responds, "It's just water guys. Simmer down. This is nothing. Wait till you get a load of the one coming after me, who already stands among you, whose sandals I'm not even fit to untie." The next day, John sees Jesus and proclaims him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one he was talking about, who is greater than him, who came before him. John says he didn't recognize the lamb as the reason he was out there baptizing, that the Son of God might be revealed to Israel. Then John witnesses to the light he has seen. He says for a second time how he hadn't recognized Jesus, until he saw Jesus baptized in the Jordan and the Spirit descended from heaven like a dove and stayed with Jesus. He only knew then because John remembered the God who called him to baptize foretelling how he would see the Spirit rest and remain upon the one who was coming to baptize

with the Holy Spirit. John testifies to what he has seen, insisting that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

Many of you may already know that after persevering with a severe traumatic brain injury for 24 years, my brother John died unexpectedly of pneumonia related complications about two weeks ago, while we were in Orlando. When we got home from NC last week to so many beautiful bereavement cards from friends and church family, I was reminded of what a simple and sacred blessing those words are to comfort all who mourn, and I thank you for your care in those cards and in the many messages you sent me by text, email, phone, and Facebook. After a pregnancy loss a year ago, I was not prepared for a second consecutive blue Christmas. I really feel world-weary like my mom used to sing in “O Holy Night” each Christmas Eve, and it has taken considerable effort to rustle up energy to rejoice. I am grateful for the sermon fairy that visited over the last week, because I confess that I’ve been dreading gearing up to preach today, partly because the grief is still so raw that I feel like I am barely holding it together, and also because I am 22 weeks pregnant, so I’m a bit scattered and weary and hormonal anyway these days. In the chaos of this last month, though I have reached out when able and carried all our members in need in prayer, I haven’t been able to be very heroic with consistent pastoral presence. Thanks be to God for the resilient body of Christ we are given in the church, in my pastoral colleagues, our staff, our church’s leaders, and our members, who have absolutely picked up the slack, holy heroes extending the love of Christ and Christmas cheer to the isolated, the sick, and the dying in our community.

It reminded me of how last summer, I ran into a member of a former church in another state. She told me how their family had left the church after a disappointing

encounter with the pastor. The member’s teenage daughter was not doing well and when they sought counsel from the pastor, the member left the meeting feeling a bit rebuffed and ashamed. I was shocked on many levels. For one thing, that pastor was a colleague who mentored me, and I knew them to be very loving and empathetic. And the family were super gracious and reasonable folk who had been in that church for generations. I apologized on behalf of God’s church. As we discussed the context a bit more, I shared with her how her story brought to mind all the balls that I have dropped in my ministerial career. With almost two decades of professional ministry in six congregations under my belt, I remember and periodically recall the folks who I feel that I have let down in their time of need and if you are one of those, I am sorry; let’s chat. For my colleague, I recall a few situations that might have been going on in the life of their family and the church that may have impacted their ability to be fully present and helpful to that beloved member. When I contemplate my own failings, which Calvin suggested we only do in order to better appreciate God’s grace, I am comforted by a coffee mug another mentor often used that said, “Pastors are people too.” We find ourselves preoccupied and overwhelmed sometimes. We can be forgetful. We get tired or sick. We mourn. Pastors have big expectations for ourselves, especially in our helping capacity. But this isn’t exclusive to pastors. Doesn’t everybody feel this way to some degree? Perhaps you feel a bit of this in your own Christian walk, in your work life, or even in your relationships with neighbors, friends, and family. You likely recall the people you neglected to check in on or the awkward conversation exchanged, maybe even the Samaritan you left in the ditch because you were scurrying somewhere. If you are like most Presbyterians I know, you probably

quietly ponder whether you are doing enough, thinking you don't pray enough, don't study enough, don't serve enough, don't give enough, and maybe, you may wonder, that means you aren't holy enough.

When you find yourself thinking that way, John brings a good word to us today. To all of us in the pulpits and in the pews, for those in our workplaces and in the streets of Athens, for we who have put ourselves or allowed others to place us on some pedestal, to all we who highly exalt the people around us or the institutions we serve, John is here to do us the favor of managing our expectations by kicking us all down a notch. Thanks be to God, we are not some shabby knock-off of the Messiah. We aren't even fit to untie Jesus' sandals. We are not the light. And that is ok, a relief in fact to remind ourselves. God designed it that way. We are witnesses to the light. We prepare the way. We simply point to Christ, who is our heroic rescuer, the Good Shepherd and Light of the world.

When I was installed into my first ordained pastoral role, I remember the charge given by the Executive Presbyter Rev. Dr. Warner Durnell. He recalled the print of Grunewald's Crucifixion that theologian Karl Barth had above his desk. In the painting, John the Baptist was given an extra-long pointing finger that he extended to the crucified Christ, saying "He must increase, but I must decrease." For Barth, it reminded him that amongst all the contradictions he observed in himself, he could commit to doing this one thing, which seemed to him to be the fundamental work of the church. He could point beyond himself, to offer witness to the light. Adding additional layers of meaning, I have since learned that this painting was commissioned as the altarpiece for a monastery hospital that cared for plague sufferers and specialized in the treatment of painful skin diseases. So Grunewald's

crucified Christ is depicted with the same sores the patients would have had, a reminder that the Emmanuel, God with us, the enfleshed Christ shared in their afflictions, suffering with and for us. At the foot of the cross, Grunewald painted a lamb, reminding us of the title John gives Jesus today, as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin, singular, you'll notice, the cosmic sin of the world once and for all.

John reminds the church folk in today's text that we are just playing with ordinary elements of water, wafer, and wine, made extraordinary by gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, not by anything we do. We aren't the Messiah, lest we take ourselves too seriously. John tempers our expectations of ourselves and others in a way that reminds us of our dependence upon God and hopefully, encourages us to give ourselves and others a lot of grace when we sometimes drop the precious balls of loving care to those in need. We don't have to be the light ourselves, we just have to bear witness to the light and try to reflect it on any given day, as refracted through the prisms of our realities and imperfections.

But John doesn't let us off the hook totally, right? John also models for us what it is to point, to witness to the light of God we see, to share the visions we have received, and most importantly to act upon them. John wasn't Jesus. John was just copying Elijah and Isaiah, preaching texts everybody already knew, with a different slant. He was merely baptizing with ordinary water. And yet, he was clearly called by God to do it, so it must have been important work, this preparing the way for the Lord that others might see. The call had meaning and import. John didn't neglect the work, responding to God as faithfully as he could.

Like the Temple elites skeptical of what they were seeing, and even John the Baptist whose primary job was to identify

Jesus yet who twice confessed in retrospect that he hadn't readily recognized the Lord, we know it's easy to get so distracted by ordinary life while we are waiting around for the Messiah to show up. As with all the players in our text today, too often, our dulled senses don't notice when Jesus is here amongst us already. We'd do well to remember that folks are usually surprised by where Jesus turns up, often on the fringes of society. Like John, we confess that we are not Jesus. We too have mere water and words.

But at Pentecost and ever since, the Holy Spirit that rested upon Jesus at his baptism was sent to rest upon us as well, as our Advocate, to help our frail human hands accomplish holy work. We have been baptized into this community of faith, sealed by the Holy Spirit and called to serve in Christ's name together. As Ryan mentioned last week, in the midst of chaos, despite all our short comings, together, pooling our talents and gifts, we the Church have been chosen by God to put flesh on the Word. So as we begin this Christmastide and head into a New Year, be at peace with yourself and others, remembering our role is merely to offer witness to the Light. And it's not nothing to be called to point to the Son of God amongst us. Together, let us keep doing the work that has been entrusted to us whenever able, doing all we can to prepare the way of the Lord. ***To God be all the glory. Amen.***