

“A Voice Cries Out”
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Sermon #82
Advent 3
40th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
12.13.20

John 1:6-8, 19-28 CEB

6 A man named John was sent from God. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. 8 He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

19 This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"

20 John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ."

21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

John said, "I'm not."

"Are you the prophet?"

John answered, "No."

22 They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

23 John replied,

"I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,

Make the Lord's path straight,

just as the prophet Isaiah said."

24 Those sent by the Pharisees 25 asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

26 John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. 27 He comes after me, but

I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." 28 This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

John has such courage! He is out across the Jordan River in Bethany preaching. John has a following. His ministry is doing very well! It's doing so well, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem reach out to him and ask him a question. This question, I imagine, is the type of question that people thought they knew the answer. I

bet many people probably assumed they knew who John was. I mean, who can blame them? He's been in Bethany preaching and plenty of people are being baptized.

But, the question remains and demands an answer: "Who are you?"

John could have lied. John could have manipulated the situation to his favor. Instead, John is courageous! John confesses! He doesn't merely deny that he's the Christ, but confesses he's NOT the Christ!

He confesses! Let that sink in! John confesses that he is subordinate, but the Christ is superordinate. John confesses that

his life is but a speck in time, but the Christ is eternal. John confesses that he is not the light, word, and life, but the Christ is the Light, Word, and Life.

Well, then John MUST be Elijah! That's it! Elijah, the prophet of prophets! Elijah can help lead and teach the Israelites in this bizarre time in history of Roman occupation.

"No", John says, "I'm not Elijah."

Maybe at this point, the leaders are then certain that John is a new Moses. That's it! Prophet AND Lawgiver. Yes! John must be a prophet like Moses to guide the people in this tumultuous time!

“No”, John replies.

Now, at this point, we could probably all figure that the religious officials are exasperated. “Then who on earth are you?!?!?! We demand an answer! What do you have to say for yourself?!?!?!?”

John quotes from Isaiah:

“I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,

Make the LORD’s path straight.”

More courage from this messenger. More courage from this voice in the wilderness. He quotes from the prophets to explain who he is. John is not the Light, John is not the Life, John is not the Word,

John is not the Christ, John is not Elijah, John is not Moses. John testifies to and points toward the One who was, and is, and is to come. John looks to and yearns for the One who will restore creation. Yes, John baptizes with water, but Christ will do something more and that is to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John has courage and humility.

If you've noticed, this passage doesn't give John a title like the other three Gospels. He's not John the Baptist or John the Baptizer. He is simply John and John is not calling for repentance like the other Gospels describe. Instead, as Marianne Meye

Thompson says in her commentary, “his mission is to serve as a witness to Jesus so that others may believe.”¹

In other words, John “wasn’t the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light”. And John’s courage to confess that he was not the Christ, Elijah, or Moses is amazing because he could’ve easily turned his ministry to be centered around him instead of the One who was to follow him.

This scripture makes me think of how often people with good intentions have fallen into the trap that John was able to avoid. The more I read this passage, and maybe you, too, we can see that trap more easily. For example, you have a successful minister, like

¹ Marianne Meye Thompson. *John*. Louisville: WJK Press, 2015, p. 30.

John, and people are ready to proclaim them as some sort of savior. Maybe not necessarily the Christ, but someone “who can fix our problems”. Maybe these people, again with good intentions, start to believe what others tell them. Unlike John, they are tricked into believing that they and they alone can fix it. Instead of pointing to the Light, some leaders think they are the light.

Something else I see in this passage that maybe you can, too, is the issue of control. Again, John points to the One who is in control. In his confession of not being the Christ, he admits he is not in control. Yet, so many of us believe that we are. And if this pandemic has taught us anything, one thing is for sure: We are not in control of a whole lot of things. We can only control how we respond to the circumstances.

For example, an article in the Christian Century caught my attention this week². The author, Rev. Tracey Dawson, talks about pastor burn-out. Unfortunately, the symptoms of burn-out can be subtle but also happen in drastic ways such as immediate abandonment of duties, disinterest in life, and even adultery. Rev. Dawson goes into detail about how the burden can be shared between the pastor and the congregation to notice the signs of burn-out, especially as we continue to face this pandemic.

Burn-out can happen because so much responsibility has been placed on one person. And thankfully, in our own polity, our way of governing, in the PCUSA, we have the Session. And I thank God every day I have wonderful colleagues who help lead this

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/recommendations/whose-problem-clergy-burnout>

congregation. But, even in some PCUSA congregations, the expectation is for the pastor to do it all. And during a pandemic when your typical solo pastor in a church with fewer than 100 members has to work on their electronic skills as well as the production value for weekly recorded or livestream videos as well as having to do pastoral care in different ways than before the pandemic, it can get a little daunting. And again, hear me out, I am thankful for the work that is gone into the recording of our services every week so people can still tune in shortly thereafter. I alone do not have to worry about it. It takes a team.

But, "I alone should" or "the pastor alone should" or "you alone should" gets old quickly. It takes all of us to share the burden, especially during this pandemic. Yes, sometimes there is a lead

person, but it's not the sole responsibility of one person. And in Rev. Dawson's article, it's this idea of having to let go of some control because, honestly, who really is in control other than the LORD? She says toward the end of the article:

Letting go of some of this control [of executing all tasks] was good for my own well-being; it was also empowering for my church members.³

Many of us have this desire to control. I have it. It's human nature. Yet, we've fooled ourselves into thinking one person can fix it or one person can save us if that person is not Jesus Christ. And that's why John's courageous statement when asked by the priests and Levites who he was is, well, courageous! He confesses he is not the one to save the people from their sins, but he can tell them all

³ *ibid.*

about the One who can and will save them from their sins. John confesses he is not in control. John confesses that he is telling the truth. But, more importantly, John is telling us that Christ *is* Truth. Christ *is* Light. Christ *is* Life. And it *is* in Christ and Christ alone who holds our destiny.

Beloved, may we follow John's example. May we strive to always point to the Light, Life, Word, Way, and Truth. May we be that voice in the wilderness pointing to the One who was, and is, and is to come: Jesus Christ.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.