

John 1:6-8, 19-28  
December 14, 2008

South Plains  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

### Waiting with John the Witness

He was not the light.  
He was not the Messiah.  
He was not Elijah.  
He was not the prophet.

Maybe John did not know exactly who he was religiously. He was a misfit in the Jerusalem temple. Conventional worship felt strange despite the fact that he was a PK, a kid who grew up with pious, priestly parents. At some point, he rebelled and left home for the wilderness.

His story is not so different from a lot of us who know very well what we are not as far as the church is concerned, but we have a harder time saying just who we are religiously. We are not Catholic, we are not Pentecostal, we are not Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim. We've settled for Presbyterian for the time being, or until something better comes along. I suspect that a lot of us would have a hard time if we were grilled by the religious police like John was being grilled. The Jewish leaders sent interrogators from Jerusalem to find John. "Look here," they said. "You're preaching and performing religious ceremonies. Who are you? What kind of believer are you?"

I wonder if we could come up with just one line of scripture to describe our faith identity. John had no name for himself. The best he could do was to describe what he looked like, or what he hoped he looked like to other Jews:

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord.'

We call him John the Baptist. The Gospel of John (different John) calls him a "witness to testify to the light." He calls himself a "voice...in the wilderness." Everybody has to find his or her voice. John found his in the wilderness outside Jerusalem. I found mine in the church. Some of you found your voice in a business, or in the home, or in a profession, or in the classroom, or on the farm, or in a factory. Some of us have different voices for different roles, like an actor adopting the voice appropriate to a new role. Patrick Stewart has one voice for Jean-Luc Picard when he commands the starship Enterprise and another voice when he is Shakespeare's Macbeth. A few never find their true voice.

Whenever a person is elected as an elder, I pray first that they will find their voice on the session and in the church. They may turn out to be a voice of financial faithfulness, or a voice calling us to mission, or a voice of loving care for the voiceless. Sessions need a multitude of voices. That's the genius of Presbyterian government. At any given time, the Holy Spirit calls ordinary Christians to the session and gives them just the right voice to nudge the church in the direction of faithful service.

Mysteriously, the congregation gets it right most of the time, electing the people we need to follow Jesus Christ for another year. Every voice on session is important, even the ones who stammer or speak out of turn. So I pray that every new elder, and every elder who continues on session, will find his or her voice.

Beyond what happens in session meetings, however, the church as a body needs to find her voice, her public voice. John the Baptist appears in every one of the four gospels because he plays a critical part in calling the attention of the public to Jesus. He was not only calling his neighbors to “make straight the way of the Lord,” John himself was preparing the way of the Lord.

That is the challenge Advent throws out to the church every year: make straight the way of the Lord. Make sure the public gets the straight story about Jesus. Make the message plain that he is the light, “the true light which enlightens everyone.” The church is not the light and we certainly cannot pretend to be the Messiah. Like John, we are a witness to the light. That we baptize and call ourselves Christians may not ultimately be as significant as our witness to the light.

We don’t know anything about the childhood and adolescence of John the witness. He bursts on the scene at the beginning of the gospel story, filling the page with his absurd clothing, his weird diet of honey and locusts, and his harsh preaching. He’s fun to watch, but he is probably not the person we would invite for a round

of golf or a shopping trip to the mall. Nonetheless, he found his voice preparing the way for the advent of Jesus Christ.

John reminds me of some alcoholics I have known. Recovering alcoholics are not always the easiest people to be with. My old friend Wynelle Justice could be rough as a cob, confrontational until she was a gigantic pain. But, when she wanted help for the Halfway House, you knew exactly what she wanted and why she thought it was important. She was the voice advocating help for alcoholics in the same way that John was the voice advocating preparation for the way of the Lord.

Every Advent, the church is called to become a voice in God’s service, a witness to the coming of Jesus. And, every Advent South Plains installs a new class of elders charged with the job of making sure the public gets the straight story about Jesus. It’s an honor, yes. But, it can also be a pretty onerous responsibility. Outsiders will accuse us of thinking too highly of ourselves. No Presbyterian I know would dare to claim the title of Messiah or Elijah. And, few would claim to be a prophet. But, we may slip into an attitude that some would call a “messiah complex,” acting as though we Christians were right and everybody else is wrong.

The reverse side of that coin is excessive modesty. Many Presbyterians would make no claims about our faith, fearing that we might offend someone who disagrees with Christianity. I want to propose John

the Baptist as someone who can teach us about being a witness, a public voice for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first thing we notice about John is his appearance. You are probably put off by someone who dresses in camel hair and leather, and who eats locusts and honey for lunch. You might not respond to a preacher whose sermons can be summarized by the command, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He said more, but that’s Matthew’s sound bite for John. I would just point out that the people who knew him as the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth accepted his behavior and his message as authentic. They responded by the hundreds because they saw John as a person of integrity.

As we find our voice as a growing church in Keswick, people will respond to a message that has integrity. As we become more authentic in our presentation to the public, we will become more faithful in preparing the way of the Lord. That much we can learn from John.

A second thing to notice about John is the language he uses. He may not be a prophet, but he quotes freely from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s words were comforting and encouraging because they announced that the Lord had not forgotten his people. He had not abandoned them. He is coming.

John knew the tradition and the language of the people of God. In order for us to be an authentic voice of witness, we also need the language of scripture. Yes, it’s hard to understand in places, but it still communicates. So much of the English language and the culture of English-speaking peoples is rooted in the Bible that scripture works. A few years ago, E.D. Hirsch of UVA published *A Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Here’s what Hirsch says about scripture. “Far from being illegal or undesirable, teaching about the Bible is not only consistent with our [Constitution](#), it is essential to our literacy.” The church needs to know its Bible in order to be a good citizen, in order to be an educated person, but especially in order to make sure the public gets the straight story about Jesus.

That’s the last and most important thing to notice about John. He points to Jesus. We could do worse than to quote John word for word. “I baptize with water. (The church does that) Among you stands one whom you do not know.” That’s our message to the world. Out there among the world is someone the world does not know very well, or at all, Jesus the Christ. Our calling is to prepare the way for him to be introduced to our neighbors. In order to fulfill that calling, we have to be authentic and we have to know the language of faith. Then we can point clearly to the one we serve.

The session can help us insure the integrity of that calling. The preacher can help us with the language and tradition. But, we all are the witnesses, the ones with first

hand experience of Jesus' in the world and in the church.  
We are the voice, the public voice that calls attention to  
the Christ, especially in this season; and points to him  
again and again.