

John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 11, 2011

South Plains

The Thong Of His Sandal

Before there was Velcro or elastic, there were shoestrings to keep our shoes on our feet. And before there were shoestrings, there were thin strips of leather that tied a person's sandals to their feet. Those strips of leather are called thongs. At the end of a day 2000 years ago, after walking through the hot, dirty streets of Palestine, untying the thongs on your sandals, washing your feet in clean water before putting them up on a cushion was delicious. The only thing better would have been having a slave to do all that for you. When he is asked repeatedly, "Who are you?" John the Baptist says, "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

We cannot get far into the gospel of Jesus without meeting John the Baptist. Luke, who tells us the most about Jesus' birth, starts his story with a long account of the birth of John. The gospel of John interrupts his poetry about the Word who "was with God, and the Word was God," to tell us about a man named John. Why in the world do the gospels bother about a nobody like this who disappears quickly from Jesus' life?

There are two reasons that John the Baptist is so prominent in the beginning of the New Testament. The first reason is a little obscure, but fascinating for that reason: John the Baptist was the original competition for

Jesus. We believe this is so because in the book of Acts, chapters 18 and 19, there were people in Ephesus and Corinth who were followers of John the Baptist. According to Acts, when they found out about Jesus, they quickly professed faith in him. When the gospel writers set out to tell the story of Jesus whom they believed was the Messiah, the first thing they had to do was point out that John, important as he was, was not the Messiah. That little piece of Bible trivia is important only because we all know people today who follow some alternative to Jesus. They may be good people. They may follow the teachings of a good person. But, they are not followers of Jesus. John the Baptist is an early example of an important religious leader who was not the Messiah. Or, in the words of our gospel reading today, "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

That brings us to second reason John the Baptist shows up in the gospels: He had the necessary task of pointing to Jesus. He is the prophet, the witness, the authoritative voice crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord." It was a tricky job. He had to call attention to himself in order to get a hearing. But, then he had to turn people's attention to the one who was coming after him, the one whose sandal he was not worthy to untie.

That's our job at Christmas. We need to get people's attention, and then turn them away from us and toward Jesus. That's what the beautiful candlelight services, the striking poinsettias, the Advent wreath and

the Christmas Eve communion are all about. We don't want people to just admire our lovely church with its compelling music and welcoming atmosphere. We want them to notice Jesus. It's all too easy to become "church people" instead of "Jesus followers;" to defend the ecclesiastical traditions and establishment, and overlook the central figure of the church; or to even worship the buildings and traditions of our congregation and give the Savior only a supporting role.

Don't get me wrong. I love the church and the good things we do in the world. But, the church has not and never will bring in the kingdom of God. When we try, we bog down in money and politics. Jesus brought in the kingdom of God with his preaching, teaching, death and resurrection. It's not here in all its fullness; and we can see it only through his eyes. Seeing the kingdom through Jesus' eyes is like turning on a black light where the ultraviolet rays light up things hidden in ordinary lighting. In the words of John's gospel, Jesus is "the true light, which enlightens everyone (1:9)." The church, as important as it is, cannot presume to undo the Velcro on Jesus' sandal.

Actually, when we allow Jesus and not the church to be the light, the result is freedom for the church. We don't have to meet the expectations of a world that measures success by the size of our budget, the prominence of our facilities, or the importance of our members. We just witness to the light. We tell the story

of Jesus, trying our best to peel off the baggage that everybody attaches to the figure of Jesus.

I believe most people are looking for God. The number of committed atheists in the world, determined to avoid a meeting with God, is pretty small. The historical Jesus is a very attractive person. The problem is that we attach so much of our own baggage to Jesus, that he almost disappears under the load.

We make him the rule-giver, and when we don't like his rules, we turn away.

We make him a buddy-buddy and try to be on a first name basis with him. And, when he doesn't follow us to the football field or to our party, we leave him behind.

We make him our personal miracle worker, a generous sugar daddy. And, when the miracles don't benefit us we lose hope.

We make him a business guru with the secrets of prosperity, a therapist who's supposed to give us peace of mind, a good luck charm for victory, a quick fix when we're feeling guilty, or either the icon of liberalism or the defender of conservatism. And, when he is not useful, we set him aside.

Jesus has much to give us in all those areas of life. But, Jesus is the light of God, a light so bright that we cannot gaze into it and see, the source of light for seeing the truth in all our endeavors. We are not worthy to turn the switch and indeed cannot turn it on and off. We can only obscure it.

Our calling as a church in the Advent/ Christmas season is similar to what John the Baptist had to do: get out of the way so the world will see not the star of Bethlehem up in the sky, but the light in the cradle. I find that it's easy to worry too much about evangelism, to become anxious over numbers, and to wonder how to persuade more people to trust Christ. Think about John's experience. He was successful in attracting crowds to the desert where he preached. Apparently, people lined up to be baptized in the Jordan. When John was arrested and killed by King Herod, his followers did not fade away. They baptized others with the baptism of John, according to the book of Acts. You might say John was successful in founding a movement; but that was not his real calling. His real calling was to urge people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth. The best thing we can say about John's followers is that they quickly converted to followers of Jesus Christ.

George Washington was not only the general credited with winning the Revolutionary war and winning election as the first president of the United States. He is also credited with holding the new country together for eight years and for setting a pattern for our democracy. He could have sought and won a third term. Because he did not, he established a tradition of leaders who give up power for the good of the country. He got out of the way, like John the Baptist, so the cause he served could succeed. In the same way, the church needs to be

always moving aside to insure that Jesus is in the center of our mission.

There's a lot of talk about the future of the Presbyterian Church and the future of all Christian institutions. People speculate that denominations will become irrelevant, that mega-churches will either grow larger or implode, that small churches cannot afford to stay open, and all sorts of other scenarios. Some throw all their efforts into defending the honor of Christ or shoring up the walls of the church. These may be worthy enterprises. But, at the center of all our activity is the single task of pointing to the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

God does not need for us to defend his honor. The church does not stand or fall in our strength. The world does not trust Jesus because we are persuasive or clever. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to point to the Christ and stay out of the way.

This is a wonderful time to be part of what God is doing at South Plains. I mean not only the season of Advent when the excitement of Christmas seems at times miraculous in itself. It's also a wonderful season in the long history of this congregation. There are people in the surrounding area who are starting to notice God's church in this place and who come to see what's going on. We have more than enough to keep us busy welcoming them into the life of this community of believers, sharing our faith and mission, maintaining the fellowship of the followers of Jesus Christ, and working together on

common missions. Perhaps we will have some contribution to make to the larger church through our ties to other denominations in the area, and even other religious groups through IMPACT, as well as other Presbyterian congregations. I suspect our real impact will be through the simple, but crucial task of pointing to the Savior whose birth we prepare to celebrate.