

“This is the Son of God”

John 1:29-34

John the Baptist is a major player during these Sundays of the Epiphany season. We also heard about him during Advent. The gospel of Luke tells us he was the son born to Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age. We know that when Mary went to visit Elizabeth who was already 6 months pregnant, John “leaped in her womb”. We know John was related to Jesus because Mary and Elizabeth were cousins.

We can imagine that since John and Jesus were 6 months apart in age, that they played together while their families were visiting or when they got together in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals.

We know Jesus was still working in his father’s wood working shop when John showed up on the shores of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

John really made a big splash. He was somebody. As he stood on that shore surrounded by people of all shapes and sizes, he no longer lived in the shadow of his priest father, Zechariah.

John was a mover and shaker in his own right. All of Judea came out to hear him preach and to listen to what he said about how they should live their lives. Even the scribes and pharisees came out to hear what he was saying. He called them a “brood of vipers” and they still came to hear him.

In the verses just preceding today's gospel, they asked him: "Who are you? Are you Elijah?" That was a huge compliment because Elijah was the prophet they set a place for in every Jewish home at every Passover meal, hoping for his return.

So, after choosing to not follow in his father's footsteps as a Jerusalem temple priest and going out to the wilderness to preach like the Old Testament prophets before him, he must have felt pretty good when they asked him if he was Elijah.

So there John was, preaching at the Jordan to the crowds that gathered. Some folks stuck around long after he was done preaching, so they might hear words that he says away from the crowds.

People recognized him as a person God speaks more clearly to. Just as today God speaks more clearly to some people.

Next Monday our nation pauses to remember Pastor Martin Luther King. He, like John, had a group of people hang around after he was finished preaching to hear what else he might say.

Mother Theresa was another around whom a community gathered who hung on her every word.

A long time ago when I was in seminary, I was honored to walk around the Bexley community as Desmond Tutu's escort after he had received death threats for his work in South Africa to end apartheid. As a 23-year-old, I soaked in the wisdom of his every word.

The doubts I had about becoming a pastor began to melt away. Desmond Tutu was physically a small man but so spiritually powerful.

Some of you had the honor of knowing, listening to, and working with Pastor Richard Sering who pretty much single-handedly started Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries and directed it into becoming a multi-million dollar agency that ministers to those whom we would sometimes like to forget: ex-cons, the homeless, at risk youths, and the handicapped. You knew he was a friend of God's.

Martin Luther King. Mother Theresa. Desmond Tutu. Richard Sering. That's how John's disciples thought about him. Somehow, he heard God's voice more clearly than they did and they wanted to hear what he had to say.

And yet today, when Jesus shows up on the scene and begins his public ministry, John points to him and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" And John's disciples follow Jesus. What would cause someone to do something like that? John was someone people were flocking to and hanging on his every word. Yet he gave all that up and then lost his head, literally.

That's not how the world works, is it? Don't we all enjoy being admired? What is it about wanting to draw attention to ourselves?

And yet as Christians we are called to always point beyond ourselves to the One whose power gives us power, to be One whose message leads us in our daily life.

And so, John in all humility was able to say to those who flocked around him, “I am not the one to follow but He is”. He was able to give up that power and prestige because he understood that what he did was not about him but about God. If we could learn one lesson from John, it would be that it’s not about us, it’s about God.

We are gathered here today because of God. We are gathered here today so we can point beyond ourselves to the One who can give life to the world. (We are gathered here tonight to receive Christ’s presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion with him.) We are gathered here today to be strengthened to be sent out on our mission.

A Northeast Ohio Synod newsletter reminded us that “The church is the only institution that exists for the sake of its non-members”.

We forget that very often. We think we are here for us. But we’re here for the people out there. So, we can leave from here today and by our words and examples point to the One who can save the world.

John and then Jesus are the examples that we follow. John sacrificed himself, John lost his head, because he chose not to physically follow Jesus. John knew that if he went with his disciples to follow Jesus, they would be looking to him and not to Jesus. And although John’s message was pretty tough, Jesus’ message was even harder about self-sacrifice and loving without limits, even your enemies.

So, John followed Jesus by getting out of the way so that others might follow the Savior.

I've known pastors who never learned how to get out of the way of Jesus. They were criticized for being micro-managers and control freaks rather than empowering church members to be the body of Christ and to do His work. I learned a long time ago that Jesus is the head coach and I'm one of his assistants teaching the team to use all of your skills in complimenting one another on the field of life. When we work together as a team, so much more ministry is accomplished. When you come to me and tell me you want to use your skills in our food pantry, at the Redeemer Crisis Center, leading worship in a nursing home, at Lakeside homeless shelter, in GCC- greater Cleveland congregations, as a Stephen Minister or Parish Nurse, or communion carrier, renovating a room, creating new Christmas decorations, teaching an art class, or whatever; my response is always, "you do what you want to do". If you need help, let me know. If you need money, let me know. Otherwise, I'm out of your way.

Jesus is the best head coach. Jesus will give you new visions. Jesus will give you power to help others, to forgive others, to feed and clothe others, to heal others, to pray for others. Jesus saves us from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus is with us always, empowering us to love without limits.

So, we learn from John, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and Richard Sering that sometimes in our life as disciples, sometimes we need to get out of the way. Parents know how hard that is when you have to step back and let your kids make their own mistakes so

they can learn. It's often much more difficult to get out of the way than to save those whom you love so much.

We can also get out of the way in our hearts when we put aside our own arrogance and pride, put aside our cynicism about what does prayer really do or why do we have to worship and just follow the words of our Lord and see what happens. See if the power of Jesus is really there when we are no longer serving only ourselves but serving and loving all people as the church, as the body of Christ doing his work, as people working together as the team coached by Jesus Christ.

Now John the Baptist's star fades. The powers that be will arrest him and imprison him. Martin Luther King was arrested and thrown in jail. Then they were murdered as followers of Jesus Christ, but not before testifying that Jesus is the Son of God.

May the peace of God . . .

#576 -- We All Are One in Mission