
This morning marks a continuation of what we started in Advent – for the last five weeks we’ve been focusing on the prologue or overture of John’s gospel – this majestic declaration that in Jesus Christ the fullness of God came into our midst. The power and creativity that ordered the sun and moon and shining stars, the light that would penetrate the obscurity of human sin, inhabited joints as frail as ours and set up camp right among us. We’re going to continue this journey together in John’s gospel through Easter and beyond – We’re calling this series “The Light has Come” because of John’s stated goal that through hearing and reflecting on this gospel we would *believe* that Jesus is who the church testifies he is.

So let us hear together the proclamation about our Lord from John chapter 1, verses 19-34.

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.’

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The theologian, pastor, and missionary, Lesslie Newbigin describes two different kinds of news. We can only make sense of news by relating it to things that we already know something about. So there’s the kind of news that we process as a more recent development of a situation or story that the reader or hearer already has some prior information about. When we hear about police lashing out at protestors in the Middle East or about the death

of a celebrity, we process that news against the background of what we already know – the Arab Spring has shaken-up decades long power structures and governments are cracking down or dissenters – the celebrity has finally lost their long struggle against illness. These are things that we can relate to and don't have a hard time understanding.

The second kind of news, however, is about revealing something that we have no prior information about – that we can't relate to information we already know because it unearths things that we had no way of knowing. When I was in high school I had a friend whose life was radically disrupted when he found a copy of his birth certificate. At age fourteen he was suddenly confronted with the reality that the woman he had known his whole life as his sister was not his sister and the people he had up to this point known as his parents were not his parents. His sister was in fact his mother, and his parents were in fact his grandparents. Understandably he was pretty rattled - it threw into question everything he thought he knew about his family history and the dynamics of his family relationship. Like a movie with a surprise twist at the end, he was forced to go through the script of his life and reinterpret a number of key scenes with this new revelation. The way that he understood himself was taken away. I'm not sure he ever really got over it.

Does the gospel – the proclamation that in a particular person, God entered into human history – throw everything we know about what it means to be human into question so that we are forced to reconstruct our beliefs anew?

The gospel is clearly news. But the question is; what *kind* of news is it? Is it the kind of news that we can relate to our best general information about God, or is it the kind that challenges everything we think we know?

I want to suggest that this distinction helps explain the tension in the opening scene of the gospel. John, who is never designated as the Baptist in the fourth gospel - has come bringing news and he is immediately met by an official delegation from the temple and questioned. We don't have a motive for the interrogation, but it's clear that John wants us to know that the guardians of orthodoxy and public order are diligent in maintaining control over how this news is broadcast and received. Their interrogation essentially comes down to the question. Who are you? They want to know who this strange figure in the wilderness is and so they give him three options – the Messiah, Elijah, and the prophet – popular characters in the world of messianic Judaism. They are straining to press him into the kind of traditional categories that fit their worldview.

The problem is that John simply isn't interested in talking about himself and so he rejects any of these characterizations. In contrast to Jesus' seven great *I am* statements, John eschews any significance about himself. He says, "I am *not* the promised Messiah, I am *not* your Elijah come to pronounce judgment. I am *not* Moses coming to give you a new covenant. Forget what you know and start over."

Having nothing to take back to the people who sent them, the delegation from Jerusalem press him further – we've got to figure out how to make sense of who you are. And so he tells them, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord". As far as clarity goes, that's not a very helpful answer.

It's hard to pin down someone who doesn't have any interest in drawing attention to himself. John says he is only a voice – that it's useless to try to get behind the voice so that you can put it into some kind of context. To get behind the voice to the person is to overlook what's being said and John is telling us, it's not who *I am* that matters at all – I am eclipsed by the one I have come to tell you about. He is asked again and again who he is, and he says, I simply can't answer that question except in relation to Jesus. His voice is the voice of scripture, specifically the voice of Isaiah, reminding us to be prepared: to look up and pay attention because something entirely new is about to come on the scene.

If his identity is mysterious, then there's nothing to make sense of what he's doing. If there's nothing significant about his person – if John is only a voice, then what authority does he have to baptize? Why does he do it? Again, John deflects attention away from himself. "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you don't know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." In the same way that John's voice points to Jesus, John's water baptism is a sign that points to the outpouring of the Spirit contained in Jesus' baptism.

At the end of this scene out beyond the Jordan one thing is made clear – if we don't know anything about John other than the fact that he is the voice, then we know even less about the one who is coming. We are only told that he is light. John's whole life is about one thing – pointing people to Jesus.

To those religious experts, who want precise language so they can classify, examine, characterize, limit, ultimately master – to them John simply says, "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

Out in the wilderness, far from the comforts of city life, far from the seats of power and prestige, John proclaims that we cannot define the light that is coming into our darkness. All he can do, by his words and his actions, is to proclaim that the news he brings is unlike anything we've encountered before.

At this point we are given no substance: nothing upon which to build theological constructs that will secure our hopes. We are in fact told the very opposite – our hopes are not necessarily going to be fulfilled and our expectations are not exactly going to be met by the one who comes among us. In brief he says, "you won't find what you're looking for unless you open your eyes and let the light dawn upon you."

People arrive at their ideas about God in a lot of different ways, but there are two dominant approaches. The first one begins with our experience - our basic understanding of the human condition and our personal narratives as the ground source of what we may know to be true - and we interpret religious information to correspond with what our experience confirms. This way seeks an understanding of God that is relevant and contextualized, placing the emphasis on our reason and experience to guide us toward truth. It's often called theology from the bottom up. We build our understanding of God from the reality of our circumstances. This view often interprets scripture as a valuable history of religious experiences throughout the ages and sees our own experience as continuing the journey, no less authoritative than the voices that came before.

The second approach begins with scripture as it has been collected, codified, and read by the church for 2000 years. Calvin gives us a helpful image of this view, he wrote that the scriptures are the lenses through which we are to see the world rightly. Because, he said, humanity is so mired in sin, it is impossible for us to grope our way toward God through our own devices. For us to know God, God needs to meet us in the world and reveal himself. Scripture, Calvin claims, is seen correctly as the starting point for all our thinking about God and what it means to be human and our experience of the world is interpreted through it. This is often referred to as theology from the top down. It asserts that our experience is indeed important, but it is made comprehensible only when our minds and hearts are tutored by the story of God as revealed in scripture. Our stories only make sense in light of the story. John's gospel is the story of the light descending – the light that makes possible an answer to the question, “who are you?”

This is New Year's Day - a time, traditionally, when some of us make resolutions. We try to clear out the clutter of our lives so that we can be open to a kind of life that is more balanced or ordered. I think New Year's resolutions, at their heart, are about finding clarity. We want to live the kinds of lives we think we're supposed to live, but that remain hidden from us because we can't see past all the mess and disorder that we've accumulated between appointments and responsibilities, diapers changed and meals prepared, soccer practices rushed to and essays written. If I could just do this, or stop doing this, then I might be able to catch a bit of contentment.

I have no reason to think there's not some truth to all that. So if you've made a resolution, blessings. This morning John is inviting you to consider the religious clutter that keeps you from seeing clearly and pursuing Christ. After all, “Make straight the way” is a clarion call to eliminate the detours and alternate routes and construct a road that is straight and undeviating. What are the traditions, practices, and experiences that qualify your relationship to God? Maybe it's time to start over – to level the road and encounter Jesus again.

Maybe our lack of clarity has to do with the fact that like John, without Jesus we don't really know who we are. We can know our tastes, our preferences, our Myers-Briggs personality type, our learning styles, our SAT scores, our Alma Mater, our family tree – these things can be helpful, but none of them homes in on what's most important. Our lives are all bearing witness to something – what and to whom are you bearing witness? The answer to that question makes all the difference. At the end of his memoir, *Hannah's Child* the theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, “I hope the story I have told...makes no sense if the one true God is not fully present in Jesus Christ”.

That's the answer to the question of John's interrogators. He appears as a mystery, but he knows that his life does not make sense if God is not fully present in Jesus. Maybe you feel like your life doesn't make sense right now. Perhaps you don't know who you are – you feel like you're living a life that is a mystery even to yourself. Here is the news that changes everything and makes it possible for you to enter that mystery. Jesus is the one in whom you can know who you are.