

A Voice in the Wilderness
John 1:19-31
Sunday, December 28, 2025

A couple of weeks ago, I was at a dance recital. All the dancers were terrific, and most of them danced to a slow, theatrical pop song sung by someone with a perfect, well-trained voice. It was beautiful, but honestly, boring. Then a dancer took the stage to a song that sounded like it was sung in a backwoods holler after a little too much moonshine by a band with trash cans for drums. The effect was jarring, and I immediately paid closer attention to the song and its passionate lyrics. After it ended, I took out my phone to look up the song. My wife noticed and said, “Why are you looking that up? It was terrible!”

Something about hearing a distinctive voice amid all the perfection stood out to me, as it often does. I admit I like a lot of music where the singer is classified more as a “vocalist” than a “singer.” I want to hear a singer who is unique and passionate, rather than technically sound and perfect. I love those voices that, as soon as they come up in the playlist, you know who they are. Every musician fits into a genre, but the voice is what really makes an artist stand out. Human voices, through tone, phrasing, and pitch, communicate the emotions of human existence. They can shame us and bring us closer together. They can break our hearts or make us feel deep abiding love. Our voices are a unique audio signature, belonging only to us.

When John the Baptizer began his public ministry, he certainly had a unique way about him. The Gospel of Mark reports that he wore a distinctive jacket made of camel’s hair for warmth and preferred locusts and honey over a nice pizza or steak. He spent his days in the desert near the Jordan River, baptizing people in the river and urging them to repent of their sins so they could be ready for the coming king, which was quite an unusual vocation. He was loud and proud in his presentation and message. He wanted the word to get around about what he was doing.

Eventually, the authorities heard about this weirdo out in the desert and sent a team of interrogators to find out what the hubbub was about. They understood that John stood in the tradition of the prophets. (His hair shirt echoed the prophetic ministry of Elijah; see 2 Kings 1:8.) Yet when these authorities asked John who he was, he offered an unusual response, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” John said he was not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, but the voice, as Isaiah had prophesied, to clear the way for the coming king. John knew the tradition he stood in, but he also understood the power of his unique voice, and he leaned into it fully.

Yet, John was not out drawing attention for attention’s sake. He understood that his role was not to draw attention to himself, but to Jesus. The next day after his interview with the authorities, he sees Jesus and immediately points out that “This is him! This is the guy I was telling you all about!” John doesn’t use the attention he drew to push his latest sermon series, or newest book, or YouTube short. He moves all eyes and ears to Jesus. I love how our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters demonstrate this in their churches. Eastern Orthodox churches are highly visual, dominated by the art form known as “icons.” At the front of every Orthodox church stands an icon of Jesus, usually flanked by Mary, his mother, and John the Baptist. Mary and John are always pictured as pointing to Jesus. When the eye encounters them, it is moved to Jesus. Like John, we all have a unique voice. Do we use it to point others to Jesus?

John’s presentation was traditional with a unique twist, and his choice of location for his preaching was interesting as well: the Judean wilderness. The wilderness is a dangerous place. In the wilderness, there is little shelter from the elements. Wild animals are prowling, seeking the inattentive traveler. Bandits are looking to make a quick score of cash and leave no witnesses. It is a lonely place, where all the pretenses of civilization are dropped and where survival is the top priority. For the

citizens of nearby Jerusalem to hear John, they had to leave the city's comfort and face the dangers of the desert. Perhaps this was John's intention. Often, to find a deeper sense of God's spirit, we have to leave our comfort zones.

As we enter this new year, perhaps God's Spirit asks of us, "In what wilderness is our unique voice needed?" Where are the places where our unique voice can call out, pointing others to the light of Christ in the world? I believe each of us has experienced such a place, where using our voice can bring the love of Christ to others.

Recently, the Horizon Texas Conference of the UMC highlighted a story of calling out in the wilderness and showing the love of Christ. Anna Villines, a student at Market Street UMC and Mabank High School, noticed a janitor at her school pulling apples from the cafeteria trash can to find enough apples for their Thanksgiving apple pie. Moved by Christ-like compassion, she began seeking ways to use her unique voice to draw attention to the issue. Through her research and persistence in bringing the problem to the school administration, a spare refrigerator was purchased where students could store their unused food, and anyone in the school could take from it as needed. Now, Villines says that the fridge is full by the end of lunch, but always empty by the end of school. Students and school employees in need now have food to feed their families, and Mabank High School has created a model for making a dent in the over 500,000 tons of food that US schools throw away each year. Anna used her voice in a literal food desert to feed those in need, just as Christ did. Anna points to Christ through her unique contribution to her community.

Our community of faith here at SUMC has much to celebrate with the work we have done this year. Still, the founder of our Methodist movement, John Wesley, understood that we should occasionally rededicate ourselves to being a voice in the wilderness. Thus, he asked his Methodist societies to examine their spiritual lives frequently. He even codified this examination into a church

service to be held around New Year's Day. He created the liturgy and had his brother Charles compose music specifically for the service to remind us to reorient our focus to our lives and to how we can bring them more fully into line with the mind and heart of Christ.

Part of this service has become famous as the Wesley Covenant Prayer. This prayer is a solemn commitment to God, a pledge to live in accordance with His will and to be transformed by His grace. It is a commitment to be the voice in the wilderness, ever pointing to Christ. Read this prayer while resolving to mean it from your heart:

"I am not my own. I am Yours alone. Make me into what You will. Rank me with those You will. Put me to use for You. Put me to suffering for You. Let me be employed for You. Let me be laid aside for You. Let me be lifted high for You. Let me be brought low for You. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. With a willing heart, I freely give everything to Your pleasure and disposal. Amen."