

2nd Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

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*John 1:29-42*

*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.'*

*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).*

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I have recently begun having the newspaper (not the Island newspaper but a national one) delivered to my house. As a preacher, I am trying to do my best to live into the truth that Karl Barth once proclaimed: that we must live our lives with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That is to say, that we must always understand that to interpret the Bible apart from our everyday lives is an ineffective, and perhaps even unfaithful, way to explore God's word. "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," John the Baptist says in today's passage. Well, that sounds all well and good but the *real* question is this: "what does that mean *here* and *now* in the world, in our very lives?" The Christmas story, still so very fresh on our hearts in these early weeks of a new year, reminds us that God came into this world in the flesh to live among us. Therefore, the Bible guides us in our current reality.

As I have been reading the newspaper daily this week, I share with you news that I doubt will come as a surprise to you: the news is dominated, as it tends to be every four or eight years, by the transition of one presidential administration to another. Last week, President Obama gave his farewell address and President-Elect Trump gave his first press conference shortly before he will take office later on this week. We are saying goodbye to one leader and figuring out what to do with the next one. Some of us are eager for this new administration. Others of us are scared of what it will bring.

Today's passage, interestingly enough, is about another transition from one leader to another. If we back up a few verses before today's Gospel reading, we see John the Baptist's introduction. Although some of the other gospels give us stories about John's birth, the Gospel of John gives us no formal introduction and, rather abruptly, places him immediately in the river baptizing folks. The religious leaders send some priests to go investigate what's going on and they ask John a simple question: "who

are you?" He answers not by saying who he is but by confessing who he is *not*. "I am not the Messiah," he bluntly states. The priests were apparently not happy about that answer because they press him further. "Well, then," they inquire, "who are you? Are you a prophet? Are you Elijah? Let us have an answer to tell those of us who sent us to investigate!"

John simply and poetically replies with the following passage from the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

When he could have replied with a simple, "my name is John," John the Baptist instead chooses to identify himself by what he feels called to do, which is to prepare for the coming of the Lord. He understands that his role is not to point to himself but to point people toward the Messiah that is coming.

But the priests are still not happy with that answer so they continue their inquisition: "Well, why are you baptizing if you're not the Messiah?"

John's reply to this final question tells us further how much he understands his subservient place to the coming Christ. He replies, "I baptize with water but the one who is to come, I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

I'm sure this response left the priests with more questions than answers but for whatever reason, perhaps out of exasperation, they bring their Q & A session to an end. What we are left with, as readers of John's Gospel, is an understanding that John the Baptist has a startlingly clear self-identity. He knows that he is not the Messiah. He knows that he is simply called to point towards the person who is. He knows that he is not called to save the world. He knows that he is simply called to direct people's gazes towards the one who will.

As our passage today begins, John the Baptist sees, finally, this coming Messiah. Jesus is taking a stroll and John proclaims a message that he has rehearsed plenty of times before. To all who are within listening distance, he proclaims that this guy is him! Like Will Ferrell's character in the Christmas movie "Elf" when he sees Santa, John the Baptist yells out, "I know him! I *know* him! *That's* the guy I've been telling y'all about! He's right there! Look! Here is the lamb of God!"

Meanwhile, next to John the Baptist, we are told, are two of his disciples. One of these disciples was named Andrew and we are left to guess the name of the other. The two of them, upon hearing John the Baptist's declaration, leave him and go to follow Jesus.

Now, most leaders I know, whether they are political, religious, or civil, try their best to *not* lose followers. When someone on Twitter loses followers, it probably means that they are becoming unpopular or boring. When a politician's approval ratings plummet, it generally means that something bad is happening. There have certainly been many preachers who have tried to "revamp" or "pep up" their sermons when the people in the pews begin to dwindle. Losing followers is, we've been taught, something to be avoided at all costs.

However, John the Baptist, doesn't seem to mind losing followers in the slightest. John the Baptist does not fret when his followers leave him for Jesus. He does not become insecure, or worried, or mopey. Instead, he sends his followers to Jesus with his blessing. After all, this has been the plan from the get-go. John the Baptist knew that he wasn't the main event. He knew that he was opening act, meant to "warm up the crowd" and to prepare them for the *real* important event or, in this case, person.

For John the Baptist, losing followers is a sign of success, not defeat.

This, indeed, stands in stark contrast to our media-infused world in which ratings dominate. If the new TV show has bad ratings, it gets cancelled. If a politician says smart, informative things on effective policy in a boring way, they don't get the time of day. Who is following me? Who is listening to me? How much "buzz" am I creating for myself? We are taught to value these questions. We are taught that the measure of success is your life is how many followers you have attracted. We are taught that what is important is not whether what you're saying is truth but how interesting you sound while you say it.

John the Baptist cared nothing for these things. He cared not about his popularity, or his approval ratings, or his number of Twitter followers or newsletter subscribers. His gaze was fixed upon a much more important thing, the Christ, the Lamb who has come to take away the sins of the world.

We read the newspaper and it feels like the world is going to hell in a hand basket. We turn on the TV and we see one person after another who cares only for who is buying what they're selling. Truth gets cast aside when it becomes inconvenient. Levelheadedness gets forgotten when the most important thing becomes being the loudest voice in the room.

John the Baptist, however, knew that his time had come to release his followers to Jesus Christ.

You may or may not remember the fad a few decades ago of the WWJD movement? WWJD stands for "What Would Jesus Do?" When I was in school growing up, many of my friends (and maybe even myself at one point) wore a rubber bracelet with the letters "WWJD" on it. It was meant to serve as a tangible reminder that, in everything we do, we are meant to emulate Jesus Christ. However, the question "What Would Jesus Do?" had its theological conundrums. First of all, although we are called to imitate Christ and to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, there are certain things that Christ did that we can't do and shouldn't try to. Namely, we are not called to be the world's savior. That job description has already been filled. When we try to be everyone's and everything's savior, we end up pointing to ourselves rather than to the God who came to do it. Yes, "What Would Jesus Do?" is a good question to ask, as long as we accept its (and our) limitations.

One of my professors in seminary, Rodger Nishioka, has suggested an alternative to the WWJD movement. Instead, he has said he prefers to ask "WWJBD" or "What Would *John the Baptist* Do?"

What Would *John the Baptist* Do? How is it that I, in everything I do, can point to Christ? How can I challenge myself to stop pointing toward myself so often and point to Christ, instead? Now if you're confused as to how to point to Christ, be not afraid because there is a plethora of ways you can do that.

But perhaps the most important way you can do this is by proclaiming the Light in the world where you see it. As we sang last week, a "Beauteous light has broken forth into our world." Now it is our job, like John the Baptist, to testify to it.

When we hear hurtful rhetoric about our neighbors who happen to have different color skin than us, that means it's time to point elsewhere, to the Light of the World that came to save *all* of it, and not just the white portion of it.

When we see yet another shooting like the one last week in Fort Lauderdale, it's time to point elsewhere, to the Prince of Peace who has come to establish the radical notion of...peace.

When we see behavior normalized that ought to never be normalized, it's time to point elsewhere, to the King of Kings who bids his followers to turn the other cheek.

When we see, time and time again, nonsensical stuff that seeks to distract us from the *real* work we have to do, it's time to point elsewhere, to the Mighty God who tells us that ours is the holy and courageous task of standing with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and listening to the silenced.

Friends, in the transition of administrations, we are being told to point to a lot of pointless places. Let us always remember who it is that we are called to point to. WWJBD?

I would like to end today's sermon by sharing with you an oft-quoted but nevertheless appropriate passage from Teresa of Avila. May it serve as a reminder to us that pointing to Christ is not a passive state but an active verb that requires us to sacrifice much, and perhaps gain much as well!

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,*

*no hand but yours,*

*no feet but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes through which to look out*

*Christi's compassion to the world;*

*Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;*

*Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.