

When Believing is Seeing

Psalm 40:1-11

John 1:29-42

Highland Park Presbyterian Church

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In true Presbyterian fashion, I begin this morning with a confession. John the Baptist has never been one of my favorite biblical characters. It may have been those frightening drawings in children's bible story books that pictured kind of a mad man, out in the desert, dressed in camel hair clothes, hair blowing in the wind, eating a weird diet of locusts and honey, and yelling at all the people who came out to hear him. It may have been drawings of him immersing believers in the river when my own baptism occurred as an infant and involved mere splashes of water. More likely, it was his calling his listeners "snakes" destined for the fires of hell and calling for repentance in ways that reminded me of too many televangelists or revival preachers I had heard in my childhood. I know that we all need to be challenged to see the error of our ways, but the Baptist always seemed so harsh and condemning.

I like the John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading much better. Questioners sent by the Pharisees had come to him demanding to know who he was. He was publicly baptizing followers and they worried he might be one of the many teachers wandering the countryside claiming to be the Messiah, threatening the delicate balance between the Jewish people and their Roman occupiers. John denies that title, proclaiming instead that another is coming after him who is much greater, who is, in fact, the Messiah. The next day he sees Jesus walking toward him and tells his own followers that this approaching figure is the Lamb of God. He has been transformed by seeing the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus even as he was baptizing him, and hearing God proclaim that John was baptizing God's own Beloved. This is not the ranting desert evangelist I remember, but one who has seen the glory of God. And John points his own followers in the direction of a new leader.

Now from what the Gospels tell us, John had developed a huge following, and many thought him to be the Messiah, or Elijah, or a prophet. Biblical scholars

speculate that Jesus might have even been one of John's own disciples before his baptism. I know, it's hard to understand how this ranting desert preacher could attract a crowd. But he had crowds coming out to hear him, as well as disciples who followed him daily; that must have been very gratifying. It must have been really tempting to talk about all he had done for them, how they should remain with him and no one else could measure up.

But instead of indulging his own needs and claiming credit for what he had done, he points instead to the man he had recently baptized; he points them to Jesus. John didn't hold onto his followers; he didn't demand unquestioned loyalty. He released them, and pointed them in the direction of the true Chosen One of God. The brashness of his "fire-and-brimstone" preaching is not all there is to John. He could call seekers to God, but he couldn't be God. Seekers came to him in search of God, yet he didn't seek credit or recognition or even allow others to think he was the Messiah. He was sent on behalf of Another. On this weekend when we celebrate the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded of his call that we live not in pursuit of personal privilege, but of a higher calling. "An individual has not started living," he reminds us, "until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

True leaders are characterized by John's kind of humility. But when people are clamoring to follow you, praise can offer a strong temptation. It is a very human thing to search for heroes. Whether it is a political or religious hero, a sports figure or musical prodigy, a parent, or a pastor, or a teacher. We very naturally look for those who model the kinds of people we want to be, who live the lives we wish we were living. Sometimes it's just a matter of being close to someone we really admire; we're better because we're connected to them. Heroes enrich our lives, provide us with guidance, inspire us to be our best true selves. The danger comes, however, when we see only their brilliance or skill or power or talent or likableness and fail to see that they are also human. Even our heroes have flaws; none of our heroes is beyond criticism; none can ever live up to the idealized images we are tempted to create of them. The history of the church and of our world is full of stories of blind obedience to cult leaders, those who prey on our need for strength from outside ourselves.

When we can remember that none is perfect, except God, we can watch our heroes, we can learn from them, we can even model our lives after the parts of their lives that deserve admiration. We can even follow them. John the Baptist's story reminds us of important truths about what spiritual leadership looks like. His passion and energy were boundless, and his convictions were unshakable. But he knew who he was, and he knew the real purpose of his work was not self-aggrandizement or consolidation of power. His task was to point seekers to Christ.

I've always been puzzled by the question John's disciples ask Jesus when he asks them what they are seeking. "Where are you staying?" they ask. That's not the first thing I imagine would have been on my mind. I might have wanted to know who **he** would say he was, or what he taught, or something about his vision for the world or what he could offer me or those I love. But they wanted to know where he was living. It seems like an intrusive question in our day, but Jesus receives it as honest curiosity. And his response could not have been more hospitable: "Come and see." He doesn't question why they want to know this, or what they would do if he told them, or even who they were. "Come and see."

This story speaks to us of shifting allegiances. John's disciples had been faithful, curious, and loyal as they followed him about the Judean countryside, hearing him preach and watching him baptize. He had been their trusted spiritual leader. But when the time came, he pointed them in the direction he had been preparing them for all along. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We can be forgiven, I think, for wondering what this story might say to those of us gathered here on a very cold Sunday morning. David Perkins' recent retirement is fresh in our memories, and his absence not quite real yet. It is an in-between time, as we celebrate what was and do not yet know what is to come. And it is early; too soon to think too far ahead.

As we live into this new reality and next steps begin to unfold, we may feel as though we have been pointed in a new and uncertain direction. But we can take comfort in Jesus' invitation to John's curious disciples: "Come and see." We may not be able to see yet, so Jesus' invitation is also a promise. So again, Martin Luther King's words remind us that "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

We don't imagine today that our next leader will be Jesus himself, in the flesh, as John's disciples did. But that doesn't mean we can't truly follow that same Jesus, that we can't walk with Andrew and Peter and the other disciples. For the same invitation is given to us: Come and see. But many are claiming to speak for Jesus these days or in some cases even claim to be the new Messiah. How are we to tell the difference? How do we see Jesus in these days? Psychiatrist Scott Peck told an old story many years ago. It's familiar now, but it speaks to this moment. The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit with the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could say, "I know how it is". "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the significance of the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I? As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

It would trivialize the struggles of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s to compare them to a church in transition. And the work of racial reconciliation is far from complete. But our uncertainty is understandable, and a degree of anxiety is to be expected. So perhaps it helps to remember that it is the same God we rely on that inspired and motivated our black sisters and brothers in Montgomery, and

Birmingham and Memphis. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a systematic theologian as well as a civil rights leader and he understood that his calling was to work with God in bringing about what he called “The Beloved Community” marked by respect and care for the dignity of all. He knew the work was not all up to him. He knew that others would carry on. And so this morning we recall those words he uttered the night before his assassination on that balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*”

It's often in the midst of uncertainty, even of apparent defeat, as well as of prosperity, that Jesus' words offer the most hope: Come – and see. Amen