

Sunday, December 17, 2023
Third Sunday of Advent (Year B)

John 1.6-8, 19-28

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/674623451199456>

(Sermon begins at about 18:15)

“Voices Crying in the Wilderness”

Déjà vu! Didn't we just hear about John the Baptist last week? About “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”? Yes, we did. No, we didn't mess up and forget to change the Gospel reading for today. And yes, it is the same basic story introducing John the Baptist as the one who fulfills ancient prophecies about the one who prepares the way for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.

You might ask, “well, if we heard the same basic story last week, why the repeat?” Good question. Perhaps because there is more to be gleaned from the story of John the Baptist. Perhaps those who crafted our Sunday lectionary felt that John can teach us even more to help guide us on our Advent journey. To help us more fully understand and live into what Advent is really about.

Just to be clear, while there are overlaps in the Gospel accounts we heard last week and today, they are presented by two different authors, each with their own focus. What we heard last week was from the Gospel according to Mark—the earliest Gospel, which slowly reveals who Jesus is as the Son of God. With Jesus being somewhat reluctant to reveal too much about who he is as the Messiah. Today's reading, on the other hand, is from the Gospel according to John—the last of the four Gospels to be written. John's Gospel begins with the more mystical assertion that Jesus is the eternal Word that has always existed from the beginning of creation. From before creation even occurred. While Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels focus more heavily on the humanity of Jesus and his revelation to us as the Son of God, John's Gospel focuses much more heavily on the divinity of Jesus, with that being more apparent from the beginning; from before the beginning.

As to the specific Gospel passages we heard last week and today, while both share common elements—some common language from the Old Testament prophecies, and the central figure being John the Baptist—the purposes are completely different. John's role in Mark's Gospel is very much that of baptizer. In fact, that is how Mark refers to him: John the baptizer. The ensuing passage focusing primarily on John's ministry of baptism for the repentance of sins. Laying the foundation for Jesus' own baptism and some indications of how the baptism John performed is different, even a lesser act than, the baptism Jesus would provide. John's baptism being merely with water, while Jesus will baptize with water and the Holy Spirit. John's ministry of baptism being a pale foreshadowing of Jesus' ministry.

The passage we heard today from John's Gospel casts John in a different light. (Yes, things get confusing—too many Johns in the mix. Our Gospel today is written by John the Evangelist, who

is writing about a different John: the one we commonly refer to as John the Baptist). John, the subject of the passage, is cast in a different role than depicted in Mark's Gospel. And it is not as one who baptizes. In fact, John is never referred to as "baptizer" or "Baptist," as in other Gospels. And it is only near the end of the passage that we have any reference to John's baptizing ministry, and only when brought up by those questioning him. And throughout John's Gospel, his ministry of baptism is little more than a passing reference. In fact, John's Gospel doesn't even recount a complete narrative of Jesus' baptism. Only a brief mention by John the Baptist himself about one aspect of the baptism of Jesus—the descending of the Holy Spirit on him, indicating his divinity. So, in John's Gospel, the role of John the Baptist as one who baptizes is downplayed. Rather, it focuses on and highlights John's role as fulfilling ancient prophecies regarding the long-awaited Messiah.

Interestingly, the way John's role is revealed in today's Gospel is in the context of an investigation, a legal inquiry, complete with terms such as "witness," "testimony," and confession. We are told that priests and Levites were sent by the temple authorities to interrogate John. We don't know what prompted the inquiry in the first place, but given their line of questioning, there must have been assertions that he was the Messiah. Allegations which are clearly denied by John in his response to questions regarding his identity and purpose.

John continually denies that he is the Messiah. He denies that his ministry of baptism has anything to do with being the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet. But what he does confess to is quite telling: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Invoking a prophecy from Isaiah regarding the one who would lead the people to salvation. John makes it quite clear that he is standing more with the likes of the Prophet Isaiah as one who proclaims the coming of the Messiah; as one whose job is to help others prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

This is a role that will be central to John's identity throughout the Johannine Gospel. Unlike the other Gospels, which focus on his role as the one who baptizes Jesus. In John's Gospel, the one we refer to as John the Baptist would more aptly be referred to as John the Witness or John the Messenger. The one who witnesses to the coming of the Messiah. The one who proclaims a message of the need to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The one who proclaims the need to "make straight the way of the Lord."

John only appears a handful of times in the remainder of John's Gospel. When he does, he usually is found to be reiterating his assertion that he is not the Messiah and that one who is greater than he is coming after—reference to Jesus. Continuing his role as the one who, as he says in today's Gospel, is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" This role as witness to the coming of the Messiah is most vivid in the section of the Gospel following today's passage. John is with two of his disciples, "and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look here is the Lamb of God!' The other two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus . . . 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'" (Jn 1.35-37, 40-41). Because of John's witness and proclamation, one of his own disciples, Andrew, was moved to go follow Jesus, becoming one of his first disciples. And in

the process, through Andrew's own proclamation, brought into the ranks of the disciples Simon Peter, who would become Jesus' chief lieutenant. And, of course, through the disciples' own witnessing, particularly following Jesus' death and resurrection. Proof of John's role as witness and messenger. His proclamation resonating with others and that message being taken up by yet others. John's testimony leading others to faith and to following Jesus.

If you follow the logical extension of the witness of John leading to Andrew and Peter becoming disciples, leading to their work of evangelism and proclaiming the Gospel, touching the lives of countless others who took up the message and followed Jesus and similarly shared the message, the line of succession leads directly to us. Each of us came to the faith through others who shared the message of Jesus as Messiah.

Being the product of and being part of that great line of witnesses who preceded each of us in our lives of faith, we too are called to take up the mantle first carried by John the Baptist. By John the Witness. In fact, in his response to the priests and the Levites, John effectively invites others into the sacred work of proclaiming the way of the Lord. When asked who he was he did not respond, "I am the voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" No, he responded, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." He is but one voice. He may have been the first, but not the only one. He is but one of many who have heard and responded, continuing the proclamation down through history to this very moment.

In our own time, we are those who are called to be voices crying in the wilderness. Crying in the wilderness of a broken and hurting world, so in need of hearing a word of Good News. So in need of hearing of the coming of the Messiah, of the One who is the Word made flesh, who has come to dwell among us and to make all things new. The Word that provides hope for humanity. The Word that proclaims God's love and compassion for all.

Particularly because of his witness in today's Gospel, John is often considered to be an icon for the season of Advent. While the season is about the coming of Jesus, both at his birth and at the end of his ages, Advent is also about the coming of Jesus into our midst at every point in between. John fulfills a very important role as the icon for the one who first proclaimed the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. John is the one who straddles the Old and New Testaments, giving voice to and embodying the ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and pointing to their fulfillment in the person of Jesus. As he did in the inquiry before the priests and Levites on the banks of the Jordan River. As he did for the first disciples to follow Jesus. And as they each did, in turn, sharing the Good News of Jesus as the Messiah, as the living Son of God, come into our midst. Resulting in us standing in that line of succession, taking our place as those who similarly are called to be a voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."