

## “Seeing and Pointing”

A sermon based on John 1:29-42  
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
On Sunday, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
By David Oliver-Holder

What excellent passages for us on this cold Sunday morning. We are now three Sundays into the season of Epiphany. We have heard, with the help of the Wise Men, that the babe born in Bethlehem is the Messiah. Last Sunday, we heard how this one born in Bethlehem was revealed again, and in a new way, as the Messiah when he was baptized by John in the River Jordan.

If you are here this morning thinking that “Well, we have the big stuff of Epiphany behind us now,” you would not be entirely off base. Today and the 5 Sundays that follow reveal the implications of Jesus being revealed as the Son of God. But these implications stand no smaller than the past two Sundays. Yes, Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph has been revealed as the Son of God, and what that means for us is vitally important.

One implication runs through each of the scripture readings today. God has called us, and God is faithful. The work that we are to be about in the world, the witness God wants us to bear in the world, the agenda for that is not something that we are expected to come up with all on our own. God takes the initiative.

When we are called to join God in this initiative, God then provides all that we need to respond faithfully. God provides the Holy Spirit. God provides the witness of the scriptures, which tells us the long story of how God has been at work through the ages, and how God’s faithful have faced challenges in the past. God provides us with community, so that we have excellent traveling companions for the journey. We do not walk in the way of Jesus alone.

Still, we may harbor questions this morning. Looking out on the conditions of the world, and our nation, today, we may feel somewhat like the prophet in our passage from Isaiah. In response to God’s call, he did not feel inspired. He felt

daunted. "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing..."

The good news that God declares to the people of Israel, "You are my servant in whom I will be glorified," is declared to exiles, who live far from the ancestral homeland, a homeland that lies in the ruins of the Babylonian conquest. A defeated people living in the land of their conquerors will be God's "light to the nations"? We have to agree with the prophet that this seems unlikely.

God's responds to the prophet, "Yes, this appears delayed for the moment, but what I am dreaming for you will become reality." God declares, "I will see to it, and you will help, and the success of this venture does not depend entirely on you. Yes, you are weak. You are far from home. There is so much to do. But I am with you, and I will provide all that you need."

In the second reading, we find the same encouragement. If you ever think that things in the life of the church are daunting, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians can be relied on to remind you that as bad as it may be now, it has been worse. Paul wrote to that little fellowship in Corinth to address some problems.

They were riven with factions, with some saying they were all for Paul, while others said they were all for Apollos. They argued over which spiritual gift was the most important, which was a way for some to say that they were better than others. Their practice of celebrating communion involved some overeating and over-drinking, while everyone else was reduced to receiving nothing as they watched the gluttons from the periphery. And those are not the only problems!

To that group of Christians in Corinth Paul wrote,

*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I imagine that the day this letter was read to that fellowship more than a

few of the faithful snickered when they heard this. At least one of them had to turn and whisper to the one sitting next to her, "I think we got the wrong letter."

Paul wrote to them that God "will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful."

Lastly, John's Gospel shows how unexpected the transformation from spectator, from fishermen, to disciples could be. When we first meet them, the first two disciples of Jesus were followers of John the Baptist. They hear what their teacher says about Jesus and it makes them curious.

So, when Jesus passes by, and John declares again who Jesus is, the two leave John and begin to follow Jesus. Jesus asks them what they are looking for, and when the two respond, "Where are you staying?" Jesus answers, "Come and see."

And they do! Their curiosity results in a new profession, a new purpose, and in the case of Andrew's brother Simon, discipleship results in a new name. He becomes Peter. With people like this, uneducated fishermen, living underneath the occupying power of Rome, in a backwater country, with these people, Jesus would change the world. God calls us. God is faithful.

## II

Do you remember those years in the 1990s when the WWJD bracelets were all the rage? WWJD stands for What Would Jesus Do. Lots of people had those bracelets, and other WWJD merchandise.

The fad never appealed to me, mostly because of my suspicion that it is not always so easy to know what Jesus would do. As we read the Gospels, time after time, those around Jesus express surprise at the things he does. He would touch the wrong people, and eat with the wrong people, and welcome and spend time with all the wrong people, prostitutes, lepers, fishermen, tax collectors, and rebels. The religious leaders in Jerusalem ultimately worked to get rid of him, to have him killed, because they had had their fill of Jesus so often doing the opposite of what they expected the Messiah to do.

On this weekend when we remember and celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we would be right to argue that his ministry showed what Jesus

would do. Jesus would say that all people should be treated the same, that racism is wrong, as well as militarism and consumerism. Jesus would work to make sure unjust laws are undone, and that economic inequality is overcome, and that workers are treated justly.

How many people thought, during his life, that MLK was doing what Jesus would do? See what I mean? I was just never sure that it is such an easy thing to determine what Jesus would do. Those around him, those who knew him, so often had no idea.

Others during those years when the bracelets were popular felt much the same as I did. One of them has written that rather than asking WWJD, we would do better to ask WWJBD, What Would John the Baptist Do? The scholar and pastor who wrote this challenges his students to think more about what John the Baptist would do.

Our passage from John's Gospel show us what John would do. He would point to Jesus and say, "Look! Here is God's Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world." "Sin," here, is singular. John, the Gospel writer, is not talking about our sins.

In this passage, "sin" refers to the way the world is alienated from God. "hamartion" is the Greek word that is used. Think about archery. The archer shoots an arrow at a target, a bull's eye. Most archers miss the bull's eye at least some of the time. The Greeks had a word for the distance between the bull's eye and where the arrow actually strikes. *Hamartia*. It means missing the mark.

So, when John the Gospel writer has John the Baptist describe Jesus as "the Lamb who takes away the sin (singular) of the world," he's talking about the way the world is alienated from God, the way in which the world misses the mark when it comes to what God wants for the world. Jesus, John proclaims, is the one who takes that alienation away. He is the One who returns the world to the way God intended it to be from the beginning.

The word "lamb" is so important here as well. Knowing John's Gospel as we do, we know that this is at least partly a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus by the end of the story. Jesus will be sacrificed, killed, just like the

Passover lamb.

Another thing “lamb” tells us is how Jesus is different. Scholar Jack Miles has written “that the startling image of the Messiah as Lamb of God radically rejects earlier biblical images of royal majesty, and that in choosing this metaphor, God (through Jesus) is choosing weakness and electing to play the role not of the All-Powerful Passover Deliverer but of the sacrificial Passover Lamb.”

Oh, how the disciples struggled with this. They were looking for the “classic” Messiah, the one who was strong and mighty, the one who would drive their enemies away, who would restore the fortunes of the nation of Israel, who would restore the monarchy rooted in King David, who would make the nation of Israel great again. Those images of that kind of Messiah are present in scripture, and given their suffering, those first disciples wanted that.

There are other passages of scripture, however, which tell of a different kind of Messiah, one who would be a suffering servant. The Apostle Paul would write of this Messiah that “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” John’s Gospel, right from the very beginning, is telling us who Jesus really is. That’s what John the Baptist does. He points to Jesus and he declares who he really is.

### III

People of God, I think we are on to something in this. On this cold, January morning, when you may feel daunted, daunted by the shape of the world, the shape of our nation, there is good news for you. God has called us. God is faithful.

We are not called to create our mission from scratch. The success of our mission does not depend entirely on us. God has called us into community, which means we do not work alone. God provides all that we need, including the best example to follow.

In the days ahead, ask yourselves What Would John the Baptist Do? And know that you already know the answer. He would point to Jesus, and say, “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.”

That’s a mission and a message the surely needs proclamation in our

world and in our nation today. There are no better people than us to do it.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.