

Sermon
“What Do You See?”

January 19th, 2020 – First Presbyterian Church

2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Based on Isaiah 49:1-7 and John 1:29-42

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands,

pay attention, you peoples from far away!

The LORD called me before I was born,

while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.

² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow,

in his quiver he hid me away.

³ And he said to me, “You are my servant,

Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

⁴ But I said, “I have labored in vain,

I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my cause is with the LORD,

and my reward with my God.”

⁵ And now the LORD says,

who formed me in the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him,

and that Israel might be gathered to him,

for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,

and my God has become my strength—

⁶ he says,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

⁷ Thus says the LORD,

the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,

to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,

the slave of rulers,

“Kings shall see and stand up,

princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,

because of the LORD, who is faithful,

the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Gospel Lesson: John 1:29-42

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ 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?” ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² 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).

Prayer

O God, you spoke your word and revealed your good news in Jesus, the Christ. Fill all creation with that word again, so that we might hear your word for us to today. And that we might go proclaiming your joyful promises to all nations and singing of your glorious hope to all peoples, we may become one living body, your incarnate presence on the earth. Amen.

Sermon: What Do You See?

Last week we celebrated Baptism of the Lord Sunday, which marks the beginning of a series of Sundays in our liturgical calendar that orient themselves in relation to Epiphany Sunday, the day we celebrate and remember the coming of the magi to see and worship Jesus.

These Sundays, then Lent that will follow, guide us at a sprinter’s pace through the life and teachings of Jesus, leading us ultimately to his death and resurrection. But these Sundays after Epiphany in particular, celebrate the fact that God is manifest on earth, that God is seen in the human being named Jesus of Nazareth.

It makes sense then that today we would turn back to the Gospel of John, which so boldly and directly proclaims, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (John 1:14). You might remember from Steven’s sermon a few weeks ago that the power of this verse lies in the promise and assurance that God is not to be found somewhere out there, but that God has literally moved into the neighborhood.

It’s just a few verses later then that the writer of the Gospel begins to tell the story of Jesus’ life, beginning first with the testimony of John the Baptist, then introducing the person of Jesus into the story through none other than John the Baptist himself.

For most of us, when we think of John the Baptist our thoughts immediately go towards his poor choice of clothing as he adorned himself with camel hairs and a leather belt; or perhaps his even poorer choice of food as he made a diet of locusts and honey. Or we might think of his compelling, though terrifying language in the Gospel of Luke, “You brood of vipers,” John shouts to the crowds, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Luke 3:7-8).

John the Baptist’s message seems to be one of fire and brimstone, not unlike Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Where Edwards is quoted saying, “The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire.”

Or perhaps closer to home, John the Baptist’s message is not unlike many street preachers whose signs of condemnation and whose words of judgement and wrath cause even believers to cringe as we pass by.

Most of us would prefer to shy away from such language, preferring to speak instead of the love and grace offered to us by God through Jesus. Or perhaps preferring to not even speak of our faith at all outside the safety of the walls of this building.

And that is why I find myself drawn to this text in John’s Gospel, where John the Baptist takes a very different stance. Here he does not shout at the onlookers with calls for repentance, fueled by warnings of hell. Here he does not give specific marching orders for exactly what repentance must look like in order to be authentic. Here he does not even begin with the age-old question, “Do you know Jesus?”

Instead, John's witness is quite simple, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Instead of fire and brimstone, John simply testifies to what he has seen and what he has been told.

He saw the Spirit descend on Jesus and remain on him. He heard the voice of God proclaiming Jesus to be God's Son. And he had been told that whomever that happened to was the one who was to come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And so, based on his own experience, and his knowledge of this one for whom the people waited, John could proclaim to the crowds that were gathered with Him, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

John becomes a witness, testifying to what he has seen. And as a witness, he knows that he himself is not Christ, the Savior the world, the one for whom the people have been waiting.

Now, we can grasp the role of a witness far more easily in our world. A witness is simply one who sees and then reports. A witness does not make judgements or hand out sentences.

Perhaps we first think of a witness who appears in court. One who tells of events as they have seen them. But if you watch the nightly news, you might also appreciate the visual elements and action videos that appear alongside the stories of the day. The reporters are trying to be witnesses to the things that you cannot see for yourself. If you're a teacher, or anyone who spends any amount of time with children, you know all too well that children want to be the first to tell you how so and so scraped his knee. Or how so and so didn't do what she was supposed to. In some cases, we might even call this tattling.

But being a witness isn't all negative. What parent doesn't appreciate a teacher who reports of the good and kind behavior of their child? Or what employee doesn't enjoy being celebrated for going above and beyond when she thought no one was watching?

And so, if John the Baptist is to teach us anything, perhaps he teaches us what it means to be witnesses.

And before you start throwing tomatoes at the Presbyterian pastor making such an assertion, let's take a look back at the second narrative contained in our Gospel reading.

It is now the next day, and John the Baptist is back out, probably somewhere along the Jordan, but this time he has two particular people standing with him...one we find out is named Andrew, who is Peter's brother, and the other remains unnamed.

Now these two men have been following John the Baptist for some time, but now, when John sees Jesus walk by, he exclaims again, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36).

And immediately the two disciples leave John the Baptist and start following Jesus. No formal introductions, they literally just start following behind Jesus. Until at some point, Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38).

And whatever they were actually looking for, the two disciples respond with their own question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" (John 1:38). Put in other words, where have you pitched your tent? Where do you dwell?

Perhaps these two disciples do not know exactly what they are looking for, but they know, based on the testimony of John the Baptist, they have found something of it in this Lamb of God.

And so perhaps they know wherever he is going, they want to go there to. Because perhaps there, they might just find what they are looking for.

And Jesus responds to them with three of my favorite words in Scripture, "Come and see" (John 1:39). And so, these two disciples go with Jesus. They went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him there.

Now we don't know exactly what they saw that night or what they talked about, but the story continues when Andrew goes to find his brother Simon, who is better known as Peter, proclaiming, "We have found the Messiah (John 1:41)."

Obviously, something happened that afternoon that forever changed Andrew...and it was too good of news to keep to himself. And so, Andrew couldn't help but share it with someone else. And so, he brought his brother Peter to Jesus too. And then, if you were to keep reading in the Gospel John, you would find that that eventually Peter invited some others along as well.

That invitation to come and see marks the beginning of a new journey for these disciples...because they do come and they do see. They see miracles – water turned to wine, five thousand fed with a few loaves and some fish. They see Samaritans and outcasts welcomed by a Jewish teacher. They see the lame walk, the blind see, the lepers cleansed, even on the Sabbath day. They see him wash their feet and speak of betrayal. They see him hang on the cross and take his last breath on Friday afternoon. And then, on the first day of a new week, while gathered together in fear, they see alive him who was dead, risen from the grave.

And to think it all started with a very simple invitation, “Come and see.”

And so, if we take a step back we see two ways of being witnesses, one from John the Baptist and one from Andrew...but they both center on the same thing, a testimony about what they have seen and what they have experienced.

John takes his experience and proclaims to all who would listen who this person called Jesus was – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And then Andrew takes his experience of Jesus and invites his brother to join him on the journey.

And both offer a powerful witness to the person of Jesus. Neither offers a testimony that has all the answers. Neither offers a testimony that can perfectly explain why bad things happen to good people. Neither offers a testimony that necessarily changes the mind of all who hear it. And neither even offers a testimony that decides who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is not.

But John the Baptist and Andrew, both in their own way, simply provide a testimony, a story if you will, about an experience with this person named Jesus.

And perhaps that is our role as individuals, and as a church. Perhaps it is our role, our responsibility even, to tell the story. To tell the story of how we have seen Jesus in our own lives and in the world.

Because perhaps our lives as individuals, and our life as a church, are bound up in our story of encountering Jesus.

Because perhaps what this world most needs to hear is how God loved this broken and painful world enough to enter into it as a baby born in a manger. And perhaps the world needs to hear how God is working in this world filled with war and rumors of war, poverty beyond comprehension, famine and disease. And perhaps this world, or maybe just your neighbor, needs to hear how God is working in your life, imperfect as it may be.

Perhaps the world needs to hear how you encounter the presence of God in hospital rooms, on soccer fields, at the ballet studio, in the classroom, in your office and everywhere else where God has promised to be present in his Son Jesus Christ who came and moved into the neighborhood.

And perhaps the world needs to hear it not just from me or from Steven or from anyone in this pulpit, but from you. From across the table at Bread and Butter. Or with a cup of coffee in hand sitting on your couch. Or out walking the streets of Covington.

Because perhaps our friends and our neighbors and this world will hear the message best from you, from the people gathered in this place.

And so, what do you see? Or what have you seen? Where do you see God at work in your life and in this world?

Because really you are the only person qualified to tell your story. Because that is the role of the witness. A witness is given the task of telling their story based on his or her own experience, not that of someone else's. A witness is to tell the truth of their story, rather than the one someone else might prefer to hear. And a witness is to tell the story from his or her own perspective and not from the perspective of someone else. Which means you are uniquely qualified to tell your story, whatever it might be.

And whether we want to believe it or not, we each have our own story to tell. And every story is needed in this broken and hurting world.

But the thing with our individual stories is that they also somehow come together to tell our story...to tell the story of this church. And perhaps our story is best told with a simple invitation to come and see.

To come and see what God is doing in this place. To come and see how we are feeding those experiencing food insecurity. To come and see how our preschool is loving and sharing the good news with countless kids each day. To come and see how we are housing those experiencing homelessness. To come and see how children are being nurtured in faith and youth are find safe places to laugh, learn and grow. To come and see how people are experiencing what it means to be family with those whom they share no blood relations. To come and see how a group of people from different denominations, different cultural backgrounds, and different races are brought together with the common purpose of making music and sharing a joyful noise in the community. To come and see how a season of transition has brought new life and new energy to this place.

And then, to come and imagine what God will do with and through the women called to pastor and lead this community.

For I believe what they will see is that God is at work in this place. That God is at work using us. And then that God is at work doing new things right here among us. We may not always know exactly what that looks like, but there is no doubt in my mind that God is at work and that God will continue to be at work in this place.

We might not change everyone's minds; we might not fill our pews with more people or our offerings plates with more money, but we will be faithful in our call to point to Jesus.

For that is our primary responsibility as witnesses, to point others towards to Jesus and then to invite others to come and see. To invite people to a life of discipleship where they too might see and experience the power of God with us.

And the good news is, it is not, and never has been, our responsibility to save anyone; that remains the work of God and God alone. It is, however, our responsibility to faithfully share our story of what we have seen and what we have heard.

Charge and Benediction

Friends, may we hear a call to be more like John the Baptist, or more like Andrew. May we call attention to Jesus Christ who came and moved into our neighborhood. And then may we say, or maybe even shout, to all who are within hearing distance, "Hey, look! See! God is alive. God is in our midst. The Holy Spirit is at work in us and through us and for us and sometimes even in spite of us! Behold! The Lamb of God!"