

Sermon: Magnify the Lord

New North Church, Hingham

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13 December 2020

Based on **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28**

The great Mississippi and Missouri Rivers meet and flow together for miles before they mix their waters. Like those two rivers, each Advent Sunday brings us ever so subtly from the end times to the birth of Jesus without blending together. Now, things are beginning to converge toward Jesus. Now, we've heard first what God wants for all the nations and then how God will accomplish it.

In first-century Israel and Judah, many people claimed to be prophets and Messiahs. False prophets and Messiahs were enough of a problem that the religious leaders in Jerusalem felt the need to track them down, and that's why they sent some priests and Levites to check out this John the baptizer character.

At the same time, everyone was expecting the imminent return of Elijah. Rumors about John thus generated some interest. What if this was it? What if this baptizer *was* Elijah; what if he *was* the Messiah? How would that play out with the Romans? Or with the Zealots, a troublesome political group out of Galilee? A false Messiah was bad enough but having the real one on the loose could be equally disastrous. The real Messiah might try to overthrow Rome, which was considered not good since no one expected Rome to lose.

So, as we heard, the priests and Levites asked John, 'Who *are* you? And he volunteered the information that he wasn't the Messiah. But they persisted: 'Are you Elijah?' 'No.' 'The prophet?' 'No.' Then they asked again, 'Who *are you*? What do you say about *yourself*?' To that, John quotes Isaiah. Then they ask him the best question: 'Why then are you baptizing?' And he gives them the best non-answer: 'I baptize with water.'

What the priests and Levites don't know, but we do, is that they are talking to 'a man *sent from God*.' John's authority outweighs the authority of the priests and Levites.

So, why would anyone need to witness to Jesus, to testify, to tell his story?

Mostly because the claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God was widely disputed, bringing ridicule and persecution to those who claimed it. Hence the need for witnesses to talk about him, to write about him, and to verify his authority.

John the baptizer's message was intended to lead people to faith, to trust in and testify to the Light, which was Jesus Christ. All who come to faith in Jesus, including all of us here this morning, are indirectly dependent on John's testimony.

When I was a kid, it never occurred to me that the various histories I was reading might be false. It never occurred to me that what I was reading, or hearing in a newscast, might be a lie. So, now more than ever, seeing is believing.

Like most of us, I wasn't at the Battle of Yorktown, but I have faith that there *was* a Battle of Yorktown and that George Washington commanded the troops that won it.

Neither was I on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus first walked by, looking for disciples, but I have faith in Jesus Christ because I trust in the witness of a man sent from God, whose name was John.

We can only rely on the witness and testimony of qualified historians, scholars, and the *people who were there* to get the story right. We are a very skeptical people these days, and sometimes I think we don't trust anything that doesn't agree with our own preconceived notions.

Imagine how astounding it must have been in 1781 for Hinghamites to hear that Washington actually won the war, after all he had to deal with. Imagine, today, hearing about a man in the desert sent from God who was offering a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. How would we react to that bit of news? Would we drop everything and go out to him, as all of Jerusalem once did?

Isaiah 61 represents God's vision of hope, healing, freedom, comfort, and salvation for all people. One day, in a synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus himself loosely quoted Isaiah 61 verse 1, reading from the scroll, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he stopped there, without a word about vengeance, rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21)

By reading this Scripture and by claiming it had been fulfilled in him, Jesus removed the judgement of exile from us. He restored those who had been made less than human by captivity, disability, or the bad luck of being poor.

And when God said, “For I the Lord love justice,” we can imagine unspoken but implied follow-up questions for Isaiah and the nation. God could well have asked, “What about you? Do *you* love justice?” Because the covenant is a two-way street.

Justice simply means getting what you deserve, and there are two sides of that coin. God restored and favored the oppressed and brought retribution and vengeance to the oppressor. John the baptizer came as a witness to testify to the light of Emmanuel, God-with-Us, Jesus Christ, who will show us how it’s done. Not everyone in Galilee heard this as Good News and certainly not everyone thinks so today either.

The passage from Luke that we read earlier is called *The Magnificat*, from the first word Mary speaks. Martin Luther worked on this passage from November 1520 until he was interrupted in March 1521; he finished at the end of May or so. He broke the passage down verse by verse and wrote extensively about each.

A scholar named Voldemars Laucins wrote that Luther notes that “Mary begins with herself and sings what God has done for her. Thus, she teaches a twofold lesson. First, every one of us should pay attention” to what God does for them, and second, that everyone should strive to be foremost in praising God by *showing* the works done to them, and then by praising God for the works done to others.¹

In the film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, after robbing the Union Pacific *Overland Flyer* train one too many times, Butch and Sundance are on the run from a relentless posse. During the extended chase scene, every now and then the loveable bandits pause to look back at their pursuers. They take turns asking, “Who are those guys?” They become more and more exasperated but eventually begin to figure out who is chasing them.

That thought – that question – pops up for me whenever I read this passage from John’s Gospel. If it’s your job to vet all the prophets roaming the countryside, and you hear about a baptizer in the wilderness, your first thought might very well be, “Who is this guy?” And then when you meet him, he tells you who he isn’t but not who he is. It must have been exasperating. But they had a job to do and they did their best.

The Rev. Norman Theiss wrote that, ‘In one sense, we are all John the Baptists, trying to point to a gospel and a salvation that we do not adequately understand.’ To become effective witnesses ourselves, we need to spend some time with Jesus, absorbing his lessons and applying them to our own lives. As believers, we have a responsibility to be people who reflect the light of Christ and to live in such a way that our lives proclaim the light of Christ in the world.

As individuals, we can’t save the world, we can’t solve its deepest problems, and we can’t build the perfect society, because we are, after all, only human. It’s an incredible burden to carry if we think otherwise. But we are free to serve God to the best of our abilities, to be ourselves, to magnify the Lord by living into the purpose we were created by God to achieve.

The highest of all God’s works is the Incarnation, and Mary was the first to preach on it. Her message: give all glory to God.

Amen.

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¹ Laucins, Voldemars. 2010. “Mariology of Luther’s *The Magnificat* and *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*.” *Logia* 19 (3): 19–28 Accessed December 11, 2020.