

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 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 Chosen One."

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).

On several occasions this past week, I have been a part of conversations about taking down the Christmas decorations. The Sunday after Epiphany is when we take down the decorations in the church, so that task was completed last Sunday. I already miss them, especially the Christmas lights.

The soft twinkling Christmas lights are special as they break through the darkness. They remind me of how Christ comes into our lives and breaks through evil, the darkness which hovers around us, and waits for us to succumb to it. The Christmas lights may be put away for now, but we always have the light of Christ with us.

Once again, this week, we are revisiting the events around the baptism of Jesus. Actually, what we read happens sometime after Jesus' baptism and his temptation experience in the desert. First, let's remember some things about John the Baptist because he is the one who sets the stage for the events in today's text. Other texts involving him tell us that he was a bit unusual, his dress and eating habits challenged the norms of society in those days, and they make many of us cringe today.

But there was something about him that made people stop and listen to him. People longed for the message he preached, and so, when he spoke, he commanded the attention of those who were near enough to hear him. His voice continues to pursue the attention of our souls today as well. The message he shared with all who would listen was challenging in part, but it was also filled with promise and hope.

Some might say he was a lunatic, but they could not deny his passion to announce the Good News that God was busy carrying out his plan to fulfill his promise to send someone special to save his children. He recognized that special someone to be Jesus.

The scriptures tell us that even as John was being formed in his mother Elizabeth's womb, he knew there was something special about Jesus. The recorded biblical story tells us that

when Mary, the mother of Jesus, went to stay with her cousin, Elizabeth, for a bit, she was greeted by Elizabeth, and as she approached Mary, the child within her, John, leapt.

As the years passed, we learn that John grew to have a greater understanding of who his relative Jesus was, especially on the day he baptized Jesus. Here, John says that when he baptized Jesus, The Spirit revealed to him, with certainty, that Jesus was the Chosen One, the one who came to save God's children. He said it was the Spirit who came like a dove upon Jesus that made this known to him.

Who was this Spirit, and how did this Spirit communicate this knowledge to John? A little background information from those days may help answer some of our questions. You see, in Palestine in those days, the dove was a sacred bird. It was not hunted and it was not eaten. Perhaps this came about beginning with the story of creation where we read in Genesis 1:2 that the creative Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

The Rabbis used to say that the Spirit of God moved and fluttered like a dove over the ancient chaos during creation, breathing order and beauty into it. The picture, then, of the dove was one which the Jews knew and loved. For them, it was a sign of God's presence.

It was at his baptism that the Spirit came down, like a dove, upon Jesus with power. We must remember that at this time the Christian doctrine of the Spirit as the Holy Spirit, the Helper, the Advocate, had not yet come into being. To the Jew there were three basic ideas of the Spirit. The Spirit was power, the Spirit was life and the Spirit was God. They believed the Spirit came upon someone with information, a blessing, a short-term visit, not an indwelling.

So, the baptism experience of that day did not end as our baptisms end, with a prayer, calling upon the Holy Spirit to move into and take up residence within the one who was baptized, to guide and shape the candidate's life. We must wait for the last chapters of John's gospel and for Pentecost for that understanding to emerge.

As we read last Sunday, Matthew tells us that when John finished baptizing Jesus, "the heaven was opened, and he (John) saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, alighting on Jesus in those moments, revealing Jesus to be God's Son. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" One might ask, did John actually hear a voice speak from the sky?

Quite honestly, I don't think it matters if we have the answer to that question. Through stories we read in the Bible, we know that God spoke to people in different ways. We read that he spoke through dreams, angels, and prophets. Those who have faith in God today, know that God speaks to us. We hear him as he speaks to our hearts, our thoughts, through experiences we have, through other fellow believers.

It's not important that we know exactly how God spoke to John. What is important is that John believed God was at work in the world to fulfill his promise and plan for his children, and so John was on the lookout, having a willingness and openness to hear God speak, creating the opportunity for him to not only hear God speak, but also to see God's Spirit come to rest upon Jesus, not for just a moment, but to remain forever. No matter what happened exactly, of this we can be sure—it made a huge impact on John, and he could not contain his enthusiasm and passion to share the Good News with anyone and everyone who would listen.

In today's text, we find that when Jesus passed by John, not just once, but twice, he pointed Jesus out to those near him, announcing the second time, that Jesus, the Lamb of God, was passing by them. John declared this. He exclaimed this. To declare is to openly or formally assert or announce something. To exclaim means to cry out suddenly in surprise.

Both of these descriptions of how John communicated tell us he was very enthusiastic about pointing Jesus out to those with him. He did not merely utter words to convey information, or an opinion or an instruction. He caught the attention of those gathered, and they listened. There was something about him and what he said that caught the attention of those within the range of hearing and seeing him that made them listen.

What was it that drew their attention to him and what he said, in spite of his odd appearance? If we read and study the text, we know that John was turned on by God and what he believed God to be doing through Jesus, and therefore, we could say that he glowed with God energy. People could see the glow of his belief and faith through his unleashed passion.

But there was also something about what he said that made people stop and listen. He called Jesus, "The Lamb of God." Why was calling Jesus, The Lamb of God, so significant? We find in further study that this name was in reference to a ritual the Israelites practiced as they were instructed in the law, which we find in the Old Testament scriptures in Exodus 29:38-42.

Every morning and evening in biblical times, a lamb was sacrificed in the temple for the sins of the people. Later in Isaiah 53:7, we read that the prophet prophesied that the Messiah, God's servant, would be led to the slaughter like a lamb. He said someone had to pay the penalty for sin, a life had to be given—and God chose to provide the sacrifice himself. John recognized this lamb to be Jesus.

John, then, calling Jesus The Lamb of God, recalling for the listening Jews the words of the prophet, and conveying the message that the long-awaited good news that the prophet had spoken had been fulfilled—that The Messiah, the promised one, was Jesus.

As time went on, we learned that many did not understand fully the role of the Messiah. The prophet, Isaiah, warned that this would happen further on in his prophecy. They were looking for other attributes in the Messiah. They believed the Messiah was coming to set them free from current oppressing outward circumstances. But, at least with the announcement from John, the door was cracked open for the Messiah to speak to the hearts of the people to hear the greater good news of the spiritual freedom Jesus brought from the oppression of sin.

We know, the sins of the world were indeed removed when Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice. The 'sin of the world' means everyone's sin, the sin of each individual, for all time. Jesus paid the price of our sin by his death, so that we don't need to. We receive forgiveness by confessing our sin to him and asking for his forgiveness. Because of Jesus, we are set free from the sins of our past and can move on into a new life.

Remember, John baptized for cleansing and purification; and for repentance, a change in life, and making a commitment to a new life, a better life. We do the same at our baptisms. We take vows at our baptism; or perhaps, later as we commit or recommit ourselves to Christ and his church. An inward spiritual change happens in us because we have confessed our sin and we have been forgiven. Through our living out our commitments, we made them to Christ and to following his example and teachings, and to our participation in his church, we also make evident an outward change in the manner of our living.

We, like John the Baptist, become illuminated. Like John, we know the chains that held us to our sins from the past, and the feelings of hopelessness that are entwined with them, have been broken. We too, are free to the awareness of the Living God in our lives, but not only to be aware of Him, but to be engaged in a relationship with God.

One who has been forgiven and walks with Christ has the knowledge of God and God's will. One knows what God's purpose is, what life means, and where duty lies. Some of God's wisdom and light has come into him or her. One who is a true believer and follower of Christ is

all aglow with the Spirit of God, just like Christ and John the Baptist. Other’s will see through the way we live and hear as we share what Jesus means in our lives, the passion in us and wonder; and hopefully, choose to join us by following Jesus, just as two of John’s disciples saw and heard it from John and then went on to follow Jesus. Then, after spending some time with Jesus, they went and told Simon, later named Peter, to come and see, to meet Jesus too.

The questions we must ask ourselves personally, and as the larger Christian church around the world is, have we become numbed over time, from the glow of Jesus, from the Good News that he has come to save the world from sin and hopelessness, to bring salvation to all? Does that mean anything to Christians anymore? Has God’s amazing love revealed to us through Jesus been clouded from our souls by other things we give our attention to? Are more Christians becoming like those Jews in Jesus’ day who awaited a Messiah to come and fix everything for them, instead of inviting him to take up residence in them and helping them change the world from the inside-out of our souls? I hear people say, and I say it too, there are things that are not going to change unless people’s hearts change, which means until people find Jesus and follow his teachings, the greatest of which are loving God and our neighbors, including our enemies.

The world is a dark place for many. We, as Christians, need to remember we’ve been forgiven and that we have made a commitment to Christ. And even as we walk farther and farther away from the glowing light of the manger, we honor during the Christmas Season, we and the world need the light of God more than ever. Christmas is over, but Christ lives on. The gifts have all been opened, but God keeps giving. We know these things to be true. The world’s observance of Christmas concludes, but the church still celebrates the light that the darkness cannot overcome.

“Henry Van Dyke, an American writer, poet, and minister in the late 19th and early 20th century once wrote, ‘Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death-and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem, is the image and brightness of Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas. And if you keep it for a day, why not always?’”

Passionate John the Baptist is a good model for the church, of which each of us is a part of, to be guided by in these post-holiday days. John’s passion, his witness, his declarations are the church’s commission: ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’ May we too, be all aglow, boldly passionate as we proclaim this message in word and deed to the world around us! Amen.