

"What Do You Say About Yourself"  
December 16, 2018

John 1:6-8, 19-27

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Breakthrough Prayer

**Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others.**

**'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen.**

The Word John 1:6-8, 19-27

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. **He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.**

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?" **John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ."**

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" **John said, "I'm not."**  
"Are you the prophet?" **John answered, "No."**

They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" **John replied, "I am a voice crying out in the wilderness, make the Lord's path straight, just as the prophet Isaiah said."**

Those sent by the Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" **John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps."**

Living the Word

The Christmas letters are arriving. We usually send out and receive over 100 cards from high school and college friends, people we have worked with and relatives. If there is a letter it tells us about the past year, of the most important joys and concerns of people's lives.

Events change who we are and what we say about ourselves. When we read about these events they sometimes come as a surprise, as an accident or new job, or cancer; sometimes they come as a culmination of things happening over a few years, as a wedding or a graduation; but sometimes they announce the end product of years, even a lifetime, of discovering who the author is, such as "I know now that this is who I was always meant to be..."

We were created to share with others who we are. It is part of being in relationship with the One who created us, and with each other. Often even great concerns in our lives can be put into perspective by some later reflection on the event, if we include God in the conversation. One letter that came this week included the line: "I am five years clear of breast cancer, and I thank God for the people who continue to support me." This is good news!

We were all created by God to live the good news. We need venues to share how God is working in our lives as a witness and acknowledgement to our Creator. Good times and bad we should be always pointing up; actually we should always be *looking up* so we remember which direction to be pointing...

Some of you may remember the 80s TV series "The A-Team". The team's cigar-chomping leader Colonel John 'Hannibal' Smith has a catch phrase he frequently used: "I love it when a plan comes together." It feels good

when a plan comes together, sometime with our input and often way beyond our control. Do we recognize it is God's plan and we are blessed to be working within it? We were all created by God to live the good news and then in some way share the good news with others.

John has written us a Christmas letter this morning: John knew that he was not the Messiah, he knew that he was not 'the One.' But as far back as he could remember, his mother, Elizabeth had told him the story of the day when Mary had arrived. Both of them were pregnant. Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb and Elizabeth, was carrying John. His mother would say "At that moment, John, you moved within me and I knew that Mary was carrying our Lord."

Just as today, family was very important. As cousins in this world, John and Jesus would have known each other as they grew up. Elizabeth and Zachariah were faithful Jews, who knew the Old Testament stories about the one true God and the eventual coming of the Savior. They depended on those promises to keep going in the oppressed world they had to live in. Elizabeth would have been his teacher until he was twelve and could go to the temple with his father.

John would also become a faithful follower within the Jewish faith and at some point he recognized that he was the forerunner that was spoken of in Isaiah: "*Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.'*" At some point John realized that God was saying to him: "You were born to let everyone know about the coming Messiah, Jesus.

John also knew the words of Isaiah 61: "*The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places; they will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past.*"

And these words: he claimed them for himself. John was preparing the way for 'the One.' He was a part of the plan of liberation for his people and the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth, by making a clear path for Jesus to finish the plan.

Mark 1 tells us of John and his preaching: "*John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, 'One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*"

At some point God told John, "You are the 'herald' to announce the Christ in this part of the plan." We don't talk much about being a 'herald' for God. We do like to sing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" that Charles Wesley wrote... I'm sure, so we would have music to pipe into American Shopping Malls at Christmas time.

But in the song, those are angels doing the heralding. Yet as we sing the carols that point to Christ, we, too, become 'heralds.' We are 'heralds' however we announce God in our lives – by how we 'live' Christmas; by how we serve others; by how we relate to each one we meet, including the grumpy ones we encounter.

This week my grandson, Oliver turned 4 years old. I was remembering the morning of his birth. For a few moments in the first hour of his life, I put my hand on his forehead and I blessed him with a few simple words: "Lord, bless this child and every person that he will touch in his lifetime. He is so special." I was being a 'herald' for my son, the father and for the mother. That wasn't my intent, but it was the result. I say a similar blessing every time I go to visit a new baby, but you don't have to be a pastor to bless someone. Don't wait for a sneeze to say "God bless you."

When John was questioned by those in religious control, about who he was, he knew. They were trying to categorize him into the role of Elijah, who it was foretold would someday return, or 'the Prophet.' John was a prophet come to prepare the way for the Messiah, but he was not the prophet. John also had to be careful about what he said to these deceptively tricky and powerful men.

We have people in our lives as well that try to trick us into believing what they want us to believe. Some are advertisers, politicians, and public reporters. Finding truth can be difficult. How do we sort the varied messages that we receive?

First, pay attention to what they ask of you; second try to understand whose plan they are working within – God's or theirs; third, depend on what you know about God and the One that God sent to teach you. Compare them to what is true and right in Christ's message of love and being in relationship with others. When a plan is happening and coming together, if it is of God, it should give you peace and joy in your soul.

Even today we would be wary of someone from the wilderness. Yet his message was to make a way for someone – 'the One' – who was more God powerful. Does the messenger you listen to point to themselves and what they can do? Or, like John, do they point to God, through Jesus the Messiah? Jesus came to point toward God. John came to point toward Jesus. Who do you turn people toward? Which way do your words and actions point?

If you heard the truth in the message of Isaiah; if you can hear John saying them because he believes them; if you can believe them; then I invite you to say them with me: "*The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places; they will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past.*"

Four years ago, the Sunday after Oliver's birth I wrote this letter to my church family, I'd like to share it with you as well: Dear church family,

This week I experienced a miracle. A child was born into my life with such tiny toes and toenails, that it is proof positive to me of the existence of God. Once again, an event in my life has changed my whole world from what it was last week. Holding a human so small, yet created in God's image, and knowing that he also carries in him a part of me – makes my heart swell almost to bursting.

This week to be a grandma meant that I could care for and spend time with Oliver and his siblings, who I also consider my grandchildren. For a couple of days I was able to relieve some of the stress of new parents, so they could concentrate just on him. I am so grateful for a flexible vocation and staff who make a way for me to be gone and to be grandma. But like John, I want to point to God, the Creator of all and be thankful for a love that knows no boundaries and a future in my life and in my work that is beyond me and my ways.

I am OK for everyone to have "Happy Holidays," but my real hope is that you, my church family, can experience and help others experience a future of hope and peace and especially the joy of Christ's love. As Always, Pastor Cathy