

A Reflection
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Bryans Road, Maryland
December 17, 2023

A Voice

John 1:1-8, 19-28

I once ran into a friend whose church had recently called a new pastor. He seemed excited about the arrival of a new shepherd for the flock, and wasted no time telling me about the pastor's style in the pulpit. "He's the hollerin' kind," said my friend. "And boy, can he do some hollerin'."

I think this is the impression that a lot of people have about John the Baptist, who often shows up in Scripture readings during Advent. John strikes many of us as a hollerin' kind of preacher. When we meet him in the Gospels, particularly Matthew and Luke, his sermon takes aim at those who assume that their religious pedigree is enough to guarantee them a spot in the kingdom of God. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7-8). That's not usually the kind of message you see in a Christmas card. But then again, John the Baptist's picture doesn't usually make it onto any holiday cards.

That's why we need the Gospel stories about John the Baptist to remind us that getting ready for the coming of the Lord requires more than just decorating a tree. It requires self-examination, confession, and repentance. And these are the kinds of things that require the kind of straight-shooting preaching for which John has become famous. His sermons have a way of exposing our unfaithfulness and disobedience. They put us on trial.

But in this morning's Scripture reading, John the Baptist himself is the one being put on trial. Not in a formal courtroom sense but in the sense of being put to the test. Some officials from Jerusalem have been sent to grill John about his identity. They want to know who he is and what his ministry is all about.

John tells them that in order to understand who he is, they have to realize who he is not. Strange as it may seem to us, reading the Scriptures from our vantage point, there were lots of folks who thought that John the Baptist might be the long-awaited Savior. This is one of the reasons why the Gospels are careful to emphasize the distinction between John the Baptist and Jesus, and to remind us of John's subordinate position to Jesus.

So when the emissaries from Jerusalem begin interrogating John the Baptist, he immediately starts testifying about Christ. "He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ'" (v. 19). No one can ever accuse John of identity theft. He doesn't pretend to be someone he's not. He simply starts pointing away from himself to Jesus, whose identity is the subject of all his sermons.

"Then if you're not the Messiah, who are you?" ask the authorities. "Are you Elijah?" "I am not," answers John. "Well, are you the prophet?" "No," says John. "Then who are you? Enough of this back and forth. We need an answer to take back to Jerusalem." At this point, John starts quoting Scripture. He dips into Isaiah and tells

them that he's just a "voice" out in the wilderness. His job is to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord by preaching the good news of the kingdom.

"Then why are you out here baptizing?" ask the authorities. "True, I am baptizing," says John, "but I'm just baptizing with water. Right now, there's already one here whose greatness puts my ministry in perspective. In fact, I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals." Notice how John's whole perception of himself is determined by the fact that the Savior has arrived. His answers to questions like, Who am I? What on earth am I here for?, are driven by the reality that in Jesus, God has arrived on the scene for humankind's salvation. "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" (v. 9).

And right before that we're told, "He himself [John] was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light" (v. 8). John the Baptist is *a* voice but not *the* voice. *The* voice, the Word made flesh, God's supreme and definitive speech to us about himself, is Jesus. And when we know who he is, we know more about who we are. We know more about why we're here and what we're called to do.

As it is on every Sunday morning, so it is on this one. We're here to exalt and magnify our Lord. We're here to follow the lead of John the Baptist. We're here to point to Jesus and not to ourselves. One pastor tells about a dear friend who always prays to "make Jesus famous." One way to do that is with our voices, as God brings them together in song. So as you listen to those who will now come to lead in worship through music, may Christ himself be supreme in your heart and mind, so that when you leave this place today, you'll not just be saying, "What beautiful and wonderful singing," but "What a beautiful and wonderful Savior."