

John the Baptist + June 24, 2018

Throughout the centuries, John the Baptist has been portrayed in art and iconography as the biblical person who points beyond himself. In some pictures, John is pointing upward or sideways enticing us to imagine that there is more to this picture than John alone.

Other images are clearer with John pointing to Jesus who may be standing right next to him or lurking behind him. In the famous Isenheim Altar Piece, John stands next to a crucifix, pointing a long bony finger to Jesus on the cross. In other portraits, John is pointing to a lamb or carries a lamb in one arm and using his free arm to point toward the lamb. These are direct references to the passage in John's Gospel, where John points to Jesus and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

In pointing to Jesus, John brings light, comfort and consolation to those who dwell in darkness and desolation. This is John's call. This is John's purpose and task.

His father as much as tells him so. Old Zechariah, struck mute, begins to sing God's praises one his tongue is loosened. The Song of Zechariah, also known as the Benedictus, meaning "Blessed be God," is pure praise to God and it also includes a word to his newborn: "You, my child shall be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sin."

At the right time, John emerges from the wilderness to announce the coming Messiah, to prepare the way and to let all of Israel know that it is time for a new beginning. Once Jesus arrives, John declares, "I must decrease so that Jesus will increase."

This is John, pointing beyond himself to one greater than he and John does more than merely point Jesus out. Beyond just saying, "Look, there he is," John is saying follow Jesus, trust him, make your home in him.

And isn't that the job of every prophet?

The prophet is the woman or man who points beyond herself or himself to the beating heart of God and to all that is loving, just, beautiful and true. The prophet points to the merciful God at work in the world. Prophets speak in such a way by speaking a word of hope and promise to people mired in desolation and like a refiner's fire and purifying soap, speak a word of truth when we fail to live from a place of mercy.

Say it this way: A prophet afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted.

We need prophets. I need them. The church needs them. The world desperately needs them.

Though Britt and I were out of the country these past few weeks, we just enough access to the news to keep abreast of what was going on back home. While tracking the events around our government's "zero policy" that separated immigrants' parents from their children at the Mexican-USA border, I noted a cacophony of voices and a whole range of opinions from Facebook friends, politicians, pundits and analysts. I find myself, in these situations getting a headache from information and opinion overload. And in moments like these, I find myself longing for a clear word, a prophetic word, a voice that is fueled by a greater vision that mere reactivity or anger.

So, I turned to sisters and brothers in Christ whom I respect and turned, as well, to the public proclamations from Christian leaders like our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. Along with many other faith leaders, she expressed outrage at the policy. These days I don't put much trust in political leaders from either side of the aisle but I do want to listen to someone, anyone, who will point beyond themselves and point beyond a place of fear, beyond political gain, beyond what might be popular or expedient, toward a vision that is loving, just, merciful, beautiful and true. I want to hear a voice from a prophet who is rooted in the heart of God.

Such prophets – such John the Baptist figures – are messengers concerned with a whole range of issues around faith and life and not merely the big scale weighty issue of justice. I believe every baptized woman or man is, in some way, a prophet, using one's unique gifts to point toward the bright light of Christ.

I have people in my life who fill that role. A few trusted folks who, in the spirit of John, speak the truth in love. Sometimes, in so many words, they need to say a truthful word like: "Get over yourself!" At other times, they will need to speak a comforting word like "Chill out. God loves you more than you know."

Who are the John the Baptist figures in your life?

They come in all shapes and sizes: mentors, teachers, justice seekers, evangelists, friends, family members, reconcilers, truth-tellers, artists, musicians, healers, comforters, preachers, wise sages, poets ... anyone who points beyond self to the truth and mercy of God.

- Who are the John the Baptist folks in your life?
- Where are the voices of prophets in the church and in the world?
- Who calls you to turn your gaze toward Jesus?
- Who serves to point beyond themselves to a vision of life rooted in God's mercy, justice, and love?
- Who speaks a word from God above the din of noisy arguments?

Until very recently, today was celebrated not merely as “John the Baptist,” but the Nativity of John the Baptist. Our Christian ancestors placed the birthday of John just six months before the nativity of Christ. And today, June 24th, is the birthday of Valerie Shields. You just can’t make this stuff up!

How appropriate since today we honor Valerie, giving thanks to God for her 32 years of ministry with us. Like John, Valerie has spent her vocation pointing beyond herself to Jesus Christ. Valerie has been a messenger and a prophet among us.

I think that’s the task of the church musician. In fact, it’s the calling of everyone in worship leadership – the Presider, the Preacher, the Assisting Minister, the readers, the communion helpers. Worship leaders must “get out of the way” and yield to the brilliant light of Christ shining in the Assembly around the Bath, the Word, and the Table.

Thanks be to God for Valerie who has tenaciously held us to this core value.

On Friday night many of us gathered here for a party to celebrate Valerie’s ministry with us. Many stories were shared. Laughter and tears were shared. We celebrated Valerie’s leadership and service among us and how she has mentored many, and through a great variety of musical genres and through the rich cycles and rhythms of the liturgical year, led us with thoughtful, inspired and often improvisational music to praise God, give thanks to God, and to seek God in prayer.

It is no small task to lead in such a way. Worship is our highest priority. It is the most important thing we do. The words of the preface say it best: “It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places, give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God ...”

+ It is our duty and joy ...

Worshipping together is our greatest duty and it isn’t merely our obligation. It is, in fact, our highest joy and delight. Valerie has helped make this so.

+ At all times and all places ...

Yes, God forms us and shapes us around God’s gifts of bath, word, and meal so that we may be Christ to our neighbors and so participate in God’s holy work of doing justice, mercy, and love. The praise of this Assembly extends into the streets and to our homes. Valerie has helped us live into this vision and from this vision.

Last Friday, Valerie mentioned Charles Wesley’s wonderful hymn, *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*. She took special note of the last line: “Lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

Isn't that a beautiful description of the Christian life?

When Valerie made mention of this, it got me thinking about Charles Wesley's brother, John, who in 1761 wrote instructions for singing hymns for his band of early Methodists. He advised them that while in worship they "sing lustily and with good courage."

Wesley wrote: "Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep ... lift up your voice with strength."

Valerie has helped make this a singing congregation. Come to PRLC on any given Sunday and you could never accuse us of being half dead or half asleep.

Wesley also said, "sing modestly." By this, he meant that we ought not have one voice dominate to be heard "above or distinct" from the rest of the congregation.

Valerie has helped make this a reality by stressing the importance of the song of all the Assembly and directing us toward a sense of holy equilibrium in our worship and avoiding turning worship into entertainment.

Finally, Wesley encouraged Christians to unite their voices together to "have an eye to God in every word we sing." Thanks, Valerie, for helping to make this true!

The church always needs prophets. The world desperately needs prophets. We need messengers, pointing us to what is good, true, beautiful, just, loving and merciful. We need folks to help us lose our lives in "wonder, love, and praise" – in wonder at the good news, in love to Jesus, and in praise of the holy and blessed Trinity.

May God continue to call and send such messengers.

It is indeed our duty and our joy to give God all our thanks and praise ... for us and for the life of the world. Amen.