

The Voice: 30 C.E. Edition
John 1:19-34
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Sometimes, the Narrative Lectionary is no respecter of the Church Calendar. It's the only Sunday of Christmas this year. By a quirk of the calendar, it's also the Sunday most churches celebrate Epiphany and the coming of the Wise Ones. But we have climbed aboard the Gospel of John train and he has no time for infancy narratives, shepherds, Wise Ones or gifts. He is here to tell us about the Word, this Word made flesh, and he has no time to waste. So here we are, still in the first chapter. After the poetic prologue Jessica shared with us last week, we get our first dramatic scene, one in which John introduces us to key characters and themes of his gospel, themes that need addressing before we get to the text because otherwise they will trouble us for the next four months.

We will hear of "the Jews." For John these are not all Jews, because virtually everyone in view in John's gospel, from John the Baptist to Jesus and beyond, everyone is a Jew. What little we can surmise about the author of this book makes it clear that he too was raised in the Jewish tradition, albeit the strain that followed Jesus.

What John means by "the Jews" are the leaders of the temple and Herod's court, the collaborators with Rome and the powers that be. That must be understood at the very beginning or John can be read as very anti-Semitic, which is not his purpose. And for John, "the Jews" are divided into two categories: the priests and Levites are the henchmen; the Pharisees are the folks calling the shots. John's actually wrong about that historically, for in Jesus' day the Sadducee sect of Judaism was most closely aligned with the powers in the temple and Herod. John likely assigns the Pharisees as the villains because, by the time this gospel was written some 60 years after Jesus' earthly ministry, the Pharisees were the only ones left. All other strands were wiped out when the temple was destroyed and Qumran was sacked some 40 years after Jesus' active ministry on earth. Just know we'll be butting heads with these leaders John remembers as villains all through the Gospel and they do not represent all of Judaism. With that prologue, and hoping I haven't scared you off, here's John Chapter 1, beginning at the 19th verse. (Read John 1:19-34.)

It was the fall of 2015. The new season of the popular singing reality talent show, "The Voice," was in the audition phase. It's not a show known for its subtlety. The premise is that four music industry professionals have a blind listen to aspiring singers, sitting in large chairs turned away from the singers with high backs so they cannot see them and, based solely on their voices, the professionals, who are sufficiently impressed, push their button for that singer, and only then will their chairs spin around to reveal who is singing.

Most of the time, those of us in the TV audience know more than the professionals. We see the people walk out onto the stage to start singing. But every once in a while, the producers want to put us in the same shoes the pros are in and we don't see the singer either. They just show us reaction shots of the pros until the first one turns around and the singer is revealed to them and to us. I'll give you a hint if you're planning to watch next season. When the producers do that, I can guarantee you two things: the person will be very good and he or she will not be conventionally what you expect a pop singer to look like. It worked that way in the fall of 2015.

An unseen singer begins to sing the pop song “Chandelier,” originally sung by Australian pop singer Sia. The song is amazing — clear, high notes, one of those voices made for stardom — and all four professionals turn their chairs. Then we see Jordan Smith, a pale, cherubic, 22-year-old man from Harlan, Kentucky with a drawl many of us ASP veterans would recognize right away, and he weighs about 300 pounds. With each one who turns, you can see how they either express or hide their shock at how the voice doesn’t match the man, at least what they are expecting. In one case, it is clear the pro was expecting to see a woman but the voice speaks for itself.

Today John the Baptizer declares himself as the Voice crying in the wilderness. And he wants to make sure everyone understands the voice is NOT the one they have been waiting for. John is just here to proclaim him, to prepare the others for him. He’s what gets the people to turn their chairs around and pay attention to the one who is really important, and HE won’t be what they are expecting at all. John will confront them and Jesus will confront their expectations.

My Well colleague, Jessica Tate, who is the Executive Director of NEXT Church, a group of Presbyterians trying to imagine who God is calling the church to be in the coming years and decades, reminds us — as we contemplate John the Baptizer — of that old slightly rude Chinese proverb: “When a finger points to the moon, only the imbecile looks at the finger.” It’s not that the finger isn’t important; it’s leading us to the way to find, or see, what we are supposed to see. In this case John is the Voice directing us to see, to encounter, Jesus, the one who is here to change everything.

After first hearing Jessica share that bit of wisdom last spring, I’ve come to call it “the Preacher Proverb” because if we have one task — those of us who stand in this space and try to bring good news week after week — it’s to point us all to God at work in the world, to point in the direction where hopefully, if we look, we too can see Jesus, the one who has come to change everything. When we preachers draw too much attention to the finger that is pointing, that is to ourselves, we are inviting the church to be imbeciles. Likewise, if a church draws more attention to who it is than what it is doing or how it is pointing all toward the one we worship, we aren’t being the most faithful either.

If John is the Voice who is pointing us to Jesus, who is the Voice for you? As I look back over the past year and prepare for the one that is coming, there are a few I’ve encountered who have clearly taken up John’s role. You’ve probably never met or heard of Hillary Park. Hillary is an immigrant from South Korea. She came to this country with her Korean-American husband about 25 years ago. Hillary and her husband own and operate the Happy BiBam Bap House restaurant in Salem, Oregon. Like most restaurants, the Park’s extremely popular eatery isn’t open on Monday nights, but not because it’s the traditional restaurant night off. No, on Mondays after the lunch crowd has departed, Hillary locks the front door, puts out the closed sign and goes to work, with her entire staff, preparing food for over 200 people, every Monday night of the year. The volunteers from her church arrive at about 3:30, help load the food in vans and off they go to the Marion Street Bridge, a popular gathering place for Salem’s homeless population.

As the folks come through the line and grab their take-away container, on every one of them there is a handwritten note. One might say “Give thanks to the Lord, who is good, whose love endures forever” (Psalm 118:1). Others may have any number of scripture passages and Hillary hand writes these on each container during what she laughingly calls her spare time at the restaurant. It’s the only proselytizing they do with this meal — that and the pastoral

counseling their ministry sometimes gives when they are there volunteering with everyone else. The Parks pay for the food themselves out of the profits of their restaurant. They do invite their patrons to donate — not to the weekly meals, but to special holiday meals they provide in addition to the weekly meal on Marion Street. Hillary Park isn't Jesus but, by her actions, her hospitality, and her life that is a living witness to him, she was a Voice for me this year.

But I don't have to look halfway across the country; I can look much closer and find Jeff, Matthew and Tiffany. They are a new team at the Night Ministry. These last few days of bitterly cold temperatures, while we were trying hard to stay warm, Jeff, Matthew and Tiffany, an outreach worker, a nurse and a case worker, part of the new Street Medicine program at the Night Ministry, were making their way through the large enclaves of homeless folks living in encampments in the South Loop, on Lower Wacker Drive, and in small groupings of homeless who are part of the encampments dispersed by the City of Chicago back in September on the North Side. They were there trying to get as many folks as they could into shelters, providing triage medical care, checking folks for frost bite and hypothermia, and getting emergency care for those who needed it. Jesus traveled among the people, healing body, mind and spirit with compassion and hospitality. Surely Jeff, Matthew and Tiffany are Voices that echo his welcome, echo his healing presence today.

And thanks be to God, we need not look beyond this very community to encounter Voices that reflect and direct those they encounter to the Jesus who inspires them. From Appalachia to Kenya to Malawi to the streets of Evanston, Northminster staff, session, deacons, members and friends have spent a year seeking to be the Voice crying out in the wilderness of 21st century consumerism, narcissism and fearmongering; deacons offering a loving hand and a new friend for a homebound member; session members respectfully debating and honing a unanimous statement this month in support of the young people called Dreamers who are in need of protection from deportation to countries they have never known; Sunday School teachers sharing the stories of faith with our young people; Youth Ministry Director Alex DeMarco helping to craft the high school retreat for the entire Presbytery of Chicago; and teams of members and friends preparing and serving meals, tending to creation, and preparing backpacks of supplies for students in need. I don't need a television show to help me find the Voice. It's right here in you and me and those we invite to join us.

We are not Jesus, we are not God, thanks be to God, but we can be a Voice. We can be many Voices declaring, pointing, coaxing, working, serving, and welcoming all to prepare the way of the Lord, to make this community, this land, this world a place of justice, of peace, of hope for all, a place where the love of God is manifest in hearts, and homes and in how we treat one another.

We are, we can be a Voice that does not proclaim our own messages, that does not draw the attention to ourselves, but a Voice that speaks the WORD into being yet again, points the way to the Word Made Flesh who has broken into the world again in this Christmas season. And is there any greater gift we can offer him than that?

One more time, Merry Christmas, Joyous Epiphany, and a Blessed New Year. Amen.