

After our 2016 Christmas Eve services, when we had one service at 5 pm and another at 9 pm, I alerted the staff that we’d need to add another service this year. We began planning for this about 8 months ago. By adding a service at 7 pm, I thought we’d disburse some of the 5 o’clock crowd to the 7 o’clock service. (In our sanctuary which seats just about 350, just over 390 people attended last year’s 5pm Christmas Eve service.)

Things didn’t work out quite as I’d hoped. We had about somewhere between 450-490 people show up for the 5 o’clock service; and another 200 at 7pm. Just over 100 folks came for the 9pm Communion service. (All told, 200 more people attended Christmas Eve services this year, and our staff team and volunteers deserve accolades for all their efforts throughout these holy days of celebration!)

One reason I think we had such a big attendance was the banner we placed above our permanent church sign about 14 days before Christmas Eve. Since we’re on a ‘high traffic’ corner of our community, lots of folks saw the banner advertising our Christmas Eve services. There may’ve been other reasons for the increased attendance, but that banner was ‘effective signage’ pointing people towards St. Paul’s for Christmas Eve.

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This morning we’re beginning a multi-week series exploring the Gospel of John. As I mentioned in our e-newsletter, you may want to bring your own Bible to write notes in, or even a small journal to use throughout this series! I want to encourage you to read through the entire gospel of John over the next few months, and I also invite you to write insights or questions about your personal reading or sermon notes in a journal (or in your Bible margins!)

Now, you might expect that we’d start this series with the famous prologue of John 1:1-19, which announces the incarnation of God in the flesh saying: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The soaring prose of these verses glorifies the Word which existed with God before creation; without which nothing that is, came to be. But I’ve chosen to focus on the other figure mentioned in the prologue: “a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

The John mention in verse 6 is NOT the person who wrote this Gospel. Indeed, we don’t know for certain who wrote this gospel. The gospel itself does not identify the author. In fact, the actual author of each

of the 4 gospels is never named in the gospels that bear the names we call them by. It is by way of church tradition that the authorship of this gospel was attributed to John; the brother of James, another disciple of Jesus.

So again, the John referred to in today’s reading is not the author of the gospel. The John whose testimony is quoted in this passage is a NT figure who is referred to in a variety of ways in each of the 4 gospels. In Matthew, he’s known as ‘John the Baptist’. Mark calls him ‘John the baptizer,’ and in Luke he is called ‘John, the son of Zechariah.’

Luke’s gospel, and only Luke’s gospel, tells us that this John is related to Jesus; that their mothers (Elizabeth and Mary) are cousins. The other 3 gospels do not make a ‘relative link’ between John and Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do agree that John was an eccentric and charismatic preacher who lived on the fringes of civilized society calling the people of Judea to repent and change their lives. But none of these characteristics of John that I’ve just mentioned are included in John’s gospel, which is also often referred to as “the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel” because it was likely written after the other 3 gospels.

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If we focus solely on what the 4th gospel shares about him, John’s vocation is only implied. He is not introduced by his family name or his place of origin. He’s not referred to as “the Baptist” or “the baptizer.” In v. 7 John is simply introduced as “A witness” sent by God “to testify to the light [] coming into the world.”

As we see later, at verse 19, some religious authorities come to press John for more information about who he is. When he’s asked to clarify who he is, John tells his interrogators that he is not the long-expected Messiah of Israel, nor is he Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of Israel, nor is he ‘the prophet’ – which may be a reference to Moses. John says he’s none of these anticipated figures and that he is also not the light, nor is he ‘the Word.’ So, to be clear, according to the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, John’s sole purpose is to bear witness to the One he is not!

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John’s vocation to ‘witness to the One he is not’ has long been understood as a vocation shared by all those who have been touched by the True Light. It is part of our identity as Christ followers. Once we accept that we’ve been adopted as children of a loving God – joint heirs of salvation through the grace revealed in Christ – how can we not bear

witness to this amazing good news? But there are a couple things we can learn from John about being ‘effective signage’ as we point people towards the one we are not!

The first is to remember that while salvation is *for us*, it is not *all about us*. And so to be ‘effective signage’ we must point away from ourselves towards Christ. Indeed, one of the chief benefits of salvation is that it turns us away from an excessive preoccupation with ourselves. In these verses, we see how John keeps pointing away from himself so that the focus will be on Jesus.

This brings to mind a parable about Jesus and his disciples. “One day Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I’d like you to carry a stone *for Me*.’” He didn’t give any further explanation. The disciples looked around for a stone to carry, and Peter, ever practical, sought out a small stone and put it into his pocket. Jesus then led the disciples on a journey. At noon Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands and the stones turned to bread, and Jesus said, ‘It’s time for lunch.’ After one bite, Peter’s meal was over. Rising from the meal, Jesus again told his disciples, ‘I’d like you to carry a stone *for Me*.’ This time Peter looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back thinking, ‘I can’t wait for supper.’ Jesus led the disciples on a journey with Peter staggering after; barely able to keep up. Around supper time Jesus led them to a river and said, ‘Everyone throw your stones into the water.’ Jesus then said, ‘Follow me.’ Peter stared at Jesus: ‘That’s it? No dinner?’ Jesus sighed and said, “Do you remember what I asked you to do? Both times, I asked you to carry the stone *for Me*? So, Peter, who were you carrying the stones for?”

I think the story points out how, like Peter, we can mistakenly follow Jesus for our own purposes rather than his. But when we do this, it diminishes the effectiveness of our witness to the one we should be pointing at!

An effective sign doesn’t point to itself, but always beyond itself. Sometimes I see particularly charismatic preachers or teachers that people link themselves to, and I worry that these preachers or teachers are really drawing people to themselves, rather than pointing people to Jesus.

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Secondly, for us to be ‘effective signage’ we all must avoid doing things that would detract -- or distract -- from what we’re trying to point towards.

And I just need to be honest here. I am incredibly disappointed about the number of Christians who have a more public stage who I hear saying some of the most uncharitable things I can imagine about people of other faiths and races! And I am convinced that these people, who often claim to be defending the faith, are pushing both non- and nominal Christians away from ever knowing Christ because their declarations are so un-Christlike. Now, even as I say that, I do need to take my own inventory!

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On the other hand, I remember watching a program some years ago, maybe on CSPAN, where a Harvard professor was speaking about his research in a non-religious academic setting. After his talk, someone in the audience asked him about his research. I thought the professor was going to talk about his profession. But what that professor said, in a roomful of academics, was this: “When I became a Christian, it became my job – my purpose – to shine light into the darkness.” That, he said, was the reason for his research and teaching.

Perhaps that is the only thing we need to know as we seek to offer ‘effective signage’ for Christ. Our job is not to convince or manipulate people to “turn or burn.” And our job is not to ‘convict’ people of their sin, unless of course we want to upstage the Holy Spirit! No, it’s about letting the light penetrate our own darkness, so that we can truly radiate God’s light. Are we willing to have this light shine in and thru the whole of our lives? Does it shine upon our beliefs about life and death, about success and failure? Does this light influence the way we read the newspaper, or the way we talk about those who are different us? Does this light affect what we do with our time, or the jokes we tell? When things are turbulent on the surface of our lives, does this light help us retain a focus on the ultimate reality of God’s love?

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We’ll talk more about this next week when our focus is John 1:35-51. But I want you to linger on this quote of Madeline L’Engle, author of the book (and forthcoming movie) *A Wrinkle in Time*: “We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.” Amen.