

Last week the Gospel was about the sudden coming of the Son of Man. Today we hear about John the Baptist crying out to prepare the way of the Lord. These two weeks are a good reminder that our church year calendar doesn't move chronologically the way our other calendars do. We move thematically, and Jesus telling us to watch and John telling us to prepare is a great example of that. In both cases, Jesus is already born and already grown. This order reminds us that Advent is not just about Christ being born two thousand years ago, but the ways Christ continues to come to us in the present, and the way Christ will come again in the future.

I really love John the Baptist. He would definitely make the cut if I had to name my top ten characters in the Bible. He is passionate. He is stubborn. He is undeterred in his mission—he *is* called “the Baptist,” after all. I wonder, though, if perhaps that title is a misnomer...or if not the *wrong* title, than not the *only* title. I wonder if he might also be known as “John the Pointer.”

A few minutes ago I talked with our youngest members about how different things can point us to God and how we, too, have the honor, the opportunity, the *responsibility* to be pointers ourselves. Everything we do, every interaction we have, even every act we do in private...all of it can be used to point away from ourselves and towards God.

And what kind of God are we pointing towards? This morning's readings give us some great insights.

Isaiah points toward a ruler who will follow in the line of David. Hear the words again:

²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins. (ISAIAH 11:2-5)

These words describe the longed toward ruler, but we know that they also describe Jesus. We know that they also describe our God who came to live and dwell among us. This is a God who is just and faithful, filled with righteousness. And as the passage continues, we see that this is also a God who brings about peace:

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD..." (ISAIAH 11:6-9A)

Predator and prey, lying together. Venomous snakes and a young child playing together. All of creation, finding a way to live in peace—including humanity. There is no longer a desire to dominate, or to hurt, or to exploit. All is at peace.

But it doesn't stop in Isaiah. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul speaks at length about who our God is. And our God is one who welcomes. Paul reminds the church in Rome that our God of "steadfastness and encouragement" has welcomed us and brought us together—and that God is at the heart of this complex unity.

In both cases, Isaiah and Paul are also "pointers." They are also individuals who used their lives and their voices to direct people's gaze and attention to who God is. Isaiah, Paul, John...and us. All are people called to highlight the wonderful qualities of God and direct people's gaze to God's work.

There is a note of caution here, though. Sometimes we forget about our role. Sometimes we turn inwards. It's more than tempting to try and direct the focus to ourselves. We love for people to notice when we're excelling. We feel validated when people acknowledge our hard work. We want people to see *us*...and we tend to not care as much about whether or not our lives are pointing to God. We say to ourselves, "It's all about me, it only matters how I am effected, I am at the center of it all."

When we do this, we run the risk of ending up like the Pharisees and Sadducees that John was railing against. The Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about some issues regarding scripture and theology, but both groups had very specific ideas about how one could live righteously and be in a right relationship with God. The problem was, John saw these people caring more about keeping themselves in power and authority than about whether or not people were experiencing God's grace. They were making sure that laws and rules they helped to enforce were being obeyed. In other words, they were pointing to themselves, not God.

We often hear about these people and assume that there's no way we'd ever be like them. Surely John would never be yelling at us from the banks of the Jordan River! Surely *we'd* never lose sight of what's really important! ...and yet we would...and yet we do.

We succeed in our favorite hobby or in our job or in our relationships and chalk it up to our own talent or drive. We contribute to charities or social welfare organizations and pat ourselves on the back for how great *we* are.

There are countless ways and countless times that we forget who we are and forget *whose* we are and end up working only for our own glory or recognition. At those times, we can give thanks because God is always there.

God is always there to call us home, to call us back to repentance, to use *other* people around us as “pointers” to direct our gaze and to remind us of our baptismal vocation. Do you remember what commitments are made in the rite of baptism? I'll remind you: “to live among God's faithful people, to hear the Word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?” (ELW). In other words, we commit to being “pointers,” both individually and as a community.

And it is through this community, through these commitments, that the lives we lead point to God more effectively than any other kind of evangelism, even that of a wild man on a riverbank. We point for ourselves. We point for others. We rely on our siblings in Christ to help us see. So live your life. Live your life, all the while pointing to the God who loves you, who forgives you, who brings peace and reconciliation, who welcomes you to this table, who creates unity, and who will always call you back. Amen.