

December 14, 2008
Advent 3

"A Voice Joyfully Calling in the Wilderness"

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-29

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John the Baptist was privileged to use his voice to tell the world, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We share this same privilege with John. We have the privilege of using our voices to tell people that a tiny baby born in Bethlehem is Lord and God, and the Lamb of God takes away the world's sin.

When my son Joel attended kindergarten at Redeemer Lutheran School in Tucson, his teacher, Mrs. Ruth Moeller had the children make a special gift for their parents at Easter time. It was a Lamb cut out of construction paper with puffs of cotton glued to the Lamb. She wanted them to think of Jesus as the Lamb of God who died on the cross for their sins. She even taught them to sing songs such as, "I am Jesus little Lamb, Ever glad at heart I am."

One of the boys in his class, named Dwayne, never had the opportunity to give the Jesus' lamb to his mother for Easter. His mother was a single mom, who had a hard time keeping her life together. Every day little Dwayne's grandmother walked him to school where he learned about Jesus. He was there with her in worship almost every Sunday. Grandma brought him to worship services on Maundy Thursday because she wanted to take Holy Communion. They walked home that night. Grandma held his hand as they cross the busy street at a designated crosswalk with flashing lights. A girl in a large pick up truck had just gotten her license. She tried to get around a car that had stopped at the crosswalk. She hit Dwayne and his grandmother with full force.

I received the phone call from the hospital about 10:00 PM. There in the Intensive Care waiting room was the mother, Diane. Mrs. Moeller was already there holding her hand. She

had just given her the Jesus' lamb with cotton balls on it. Her first words were, "Pastor, Dwayne is so cold." They were keeping his body warm until permission was given by Diane to use his organs for other children. The funeral was the Monday after Easter. The grandmother could not be there because of multiple broken bones. Diane was there in the front row of the church with Mrs. Moeller holding on the Lamb that her son had made for her. In the midst of all that sadness was Jesus, the Lamb of God that takes away the world's sin. There was a note of triumph, of joy, of victory in spite of all the tears of sorrow and sadness.

What a privilege it is to use your voice to tell someone about Jesus as John the Baptist did, and as Mrs. Moeller did with her kindergarten class. Just think about how the Lord may use your voice to share with someone the amazing gift of love that our Father gave us in His Son Jesus.

A voice that enjoys being what it is

John the Baptist enjoyed being who he was, a voice for the Lord. He had no desire to draw attention to himself. "There came a man sent from God"; his name was John." This man sent from God was called to witness to Jesus the light of the world, "He himself was not the light, he came only as witness to the light." After his birth, John's father Zechariah said of him, "You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for your will go before the Lord to prepare his way."

John was so popular that the people came from Jerusalem and Judea in large numbers to the wilderness region of the Jordan Valley. Imagine walking for miles east of here into some remote area of the Sisquoc River Valley to spend time listening to a man proclaim God's Word to us. There he was with his coat of rough camel hair with a leather belt around his waist, living in the outdoors with locusts and wild honey as part of his diet. The voice of John broke into the sin darkened lives with the word of God, shattered their false hope and pride, and led them out of darkness to Jesus the true light.

Let me illustrate this with the life of Helen Keller who was born blind and deaf, and totally frustrated that she could not communicate with people. One day her teacher Anne Sullivan broke into her world and brought her the ability to communicate. Helen Keller wrote of that dramatic moment. "We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"

John the Baptist challenged people with God's Word. They were gripped by his powerful message of both God's judgment and the hope for the world in the Lamb of God. The religious leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation asking John if he were the Christ and he said, "No." They asked if he were the great Elijah come back to life, and he said, "No." They asked if he were the great prophet mentioned by Moses and he said, "No." And finally when

they pressed him to explain who he was, he drew from the words of Isaiah to describe his life, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

A voice crying in the wilderness! What a fitting way to describe your life and mine! The Lord our God has left us here on this earth to use these voice boxes or vocal cords in our throats, and our mouths and lips, to transmit to other people the truths of his life saving Word. The Lord has not given this job to angels. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world as we show forth the praises of him who has called us out of the darkness. Just think of it. Your voice can tell others how the world began. It can tell people how this world will end. Your voice can let people know the truth about sin and the danger of the judgment to come. Your voice has the privilege of telling people how God has rescued us with his Son Jesus. Your voice, your vocal cords and your lips are privilege to tell someone, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

A church newsletter once had this statement at the bottom of the first page. "I am a nobody, telling everybody about somebody that can save anybody." I am a nobody without Jesus, a lost and condemned creature. But now I am somebody special through Jesus. He has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, and he allows me to serve in his kingdom. Just as the Lord chose John the Baptist to be a voice for his time, the Lord has chosen our voices to speak the truth of his Word. Some of the best moments of your life and mine have come when we have had the opportunity to tell other people what we have seen with our eyes of faith in God's Word.

Susan and I once had the opportunity to see the famous "Living Christmas Tree" at the Van Nuys Baptist Church. The first part of concert was nothing but people singing secular songs in front of this large Christmas tree in the front of the church. I was ready to walk out, disgusted that so much of the concert was songs such as "Toyland" and "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." Then the lights went out and the church was in complete darkness. High up on the balcony a lone voice called out, "All men are like grass. And all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, But the word of our God stands forever." Then the Christmas tree lit up and embedded in the tree was the choir that began singing from Handel's Messiah, "For unto us..." The voice that cried out wanted us to know that so much of this life is temporary and fleeting, even the presents, and good times we have with family and friends, and mighty financial institutions, but the word of the Lord endures forever. That's what our voices get to share with people.

A voice that enjoys pointing people to Jesus

John was highly honored to direct the attention of people away from himself and point them to Jesus. The Pharisees sent to question John asked him about his baptism. "Why do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" They wanted to know what gave John the Baptist the right to perform these special baptisms along the banks of the Jordan River. Notice what he says, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." The next day John pointed to Jesus and said of him, "A man comes after me who has surpassed me, because he was before me." John the Baptist believed Jesus existed

before him, in eternity, as the very Son of God. He believed Jesus was his Lord and God, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If you were an artist how would you portray John the Baptism pointing to Jesus and saying "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world?" Would you not have him pointing his finger to Jesus with a smile on his face, a smile of joy?

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem the shepherds found the baby Jesus in the manger just as the angel said. They worshipped him as their Lord and Savior because the angel said he was "Christ the Lord." What did they do after that? Did they return to their sheep, or try and get some sleep? No, it says in Luke, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had said to them." I am sure that Mrs. Moeller used her voice to teach the children about Jesus birth, just as she taught them that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. In your throat you have vocal chords that allow you to speak and even sing. You have hearts that believe and you have mouths that speak from what your heart believes. From the right hand of our heavenly Father Jesus is micromanaging every facet of your life and mine. He is the one giving us the opportunities to use our voices to cry out in the wilderness. This will only get better as the end draws near. Amen.