
POINTING TO HOPE

JOHN 1:6–8, 19–28

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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It is rude to point. It seems many people have been taught not to extend their index finger at another person. I don't remember receiving this instruction, but I am uncomfortable doing it even now as an example. Pointing at someone can be associated with blame, anger, or scolding. Pointing can also draw attention to another in a way that might be embarrassing. Hence the rule: it is rude to point.

In some cases, however, it seems to be what is needed. Research from 2016 has shown that young children can follow the pointing of a human figure, but cannot follow the symbols such as an arrow.¹ The youngest among us need an adult to point out the picture on a page or which person is a trusted guest.

John, the forerunner of Jesus, spends a lot of time pointing, specifically pointing to Jesus. He is not being rude nor is he talking to young children, and he may never have actually pointed a finger at him, but John does point the way.

John the Baptist, as described in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke is a man wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and honey. He shouts at those who come to hear him preach "You brood of vipers!" I imagine he may have been pointing at them and likely sounded angry. In all three of synoptic gospels, John preaches vigorously for repentance and preparation. Then he baptizes people in the Jordan River. The description is intense, with strong language and dunking people underwater; the scene may be a bit disturbing for those who like a quieter form of spirituality.

The gospel of John, as it often does, offers a different picture. According to this gospel, there is no mention of John's clothing or diet. There is only a passing reference to preaching and baptizing. Instead, according to the fourth gospel, John comes to point to the light that will be coming. His primary purpose doesn't seem to be to preach, baptize, or prepare. Right away in the gospel, the 7th verse in fact, we read "[John] came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." (John 1:7) John came to be a witness. To point. According to the gospel of John, I think it makes more sense to speak of "John the witness" instead of "John the Baptist." And this John is not the same person who wrote the 4th gospel; we will want to keep John the Witness and the gospel writer, separate in our minds as the two distinct people they are.

The theme of "witness" looms large in the gospel of John.² It starts with declaring that John came as a witness to testify to the light and continues as it describes John's conversation with the priests and the Levites as a "testimony". (John 1:19) The words "testimony" and "witness" come from the same root word in Greek. And these two words are used 45 times in the gospel of John.³ Another time this word is used is just a little further on from our reading today. When speaking of seeing the Spirit descend like a dove on Jesus, John proclaims, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One." John

¹ ["Finger pointing is the only mean of attention direction that small children understand"](#), Technology.org, May 24, 2016

² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 35

³ Mark Allan Powell [Commentary on John 1:6-8, 19-28](#), December 2014

is the first one in this gospel to confess that Jesus is the Son of God.⁴ He saw a remarkable event with his own eyes, and he understood what he was seeing. One author describes him as “a very human witness to a cosmic event.”⁵ It was a powerful experience and one he was compelled to talk about. He couldn’t let it go. Didn’t want to let it go. He needed to bear witness to what he saw.

A series of detective stories that my husband, Brian, and I enjoy are those by Tony Hillerman and his daughter, Anne Hillerman. Tony Hillerman started the series which focuses on cases taken up by the Navajo Nation Police in the American southwest. A couple of officers and a detective are the likable and honorable characters who form the thread through the series. When Hillerman died, his daughter picked up his work and is continuing the series. I recently listened to one of Anne Hillerman’s books⁶, which was particularly enjoyable because the producers of the audiobook were careful to have the correct pronunciation of the Navajo words used in the story. Having never heard Navajo, I enjoyed the sound of the language. The story opens with Officer Bernadette Manuelito witnessing a car strike and kill a pedestrian. The circumstances were such that there was no doubt that the actions were intentional murder. Her witnessing of the crime drove the plot of the novel. With restlessness and persistence, she worked to solve the mystery of the crime. Having seen what she had seen, and knowing what she knew, she could and would not let it go.

Both John the Witness and John the gospel, seem to have this same kind of persistence, though more so. They are compelled to talk about what they know is true, and to point to what is to come. John the Witness sees the Spirit descend upon Jesus, knows Jesus is the one who is greater than he, the one that is to come, and identifies him as the chosen one. He does not, however, know how the story of Jesus will unfold. The gospel writer, on the other hand, does know how the story will unfold. The gospel is written decades after the death of Christ, so the author intentionally writes in a way that continues to point us to the light and the truth. In fact, the gospel writer names his purpose at the end of the book, saying “these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31) John the Witness points to Jesus even though he does not know how the story will unfold. John the gospel points to Jesus knowing full well how the story unfolds. Both point to the way, the truth, and the life concurrently, yet differently.

Today, I would like to point your attention to the manger, here in the center of the chancel. This manger is featured prominently in the Children’s Christmas Eve service which will be held next Sunday afternoon. It was built by a member of the congregation. Today the manger is empty, nothing but wood, even a blanket is missing.

It reminds me of a story told by Nell⁷, a former member of the Congregation. Nell’s granddaughter came to visit shortly before Christmas; she and her family planned to stay through the holiday. When her granddaughter arrived, she did as curious children do, she looked around her grandmother’s home. In doing so, she stopped before the manger scene that was displayed on a table and said, “Grandma, a piece is missing. Jesus is not in the manger.” Nell replied, “That’s right. It is not yet Christmas. Jesus isn’t here yet.” This conversation was repeated in the days before Christmas. Each time, Nell said “he’s not here yet.” This grandchild was quite disturbed by the fact that the Baby Jesus was not in the manger of the creche. She even put the tiniest of a nesting doll in the empty manger at one point. Nell gently remarked that the doll was not the Baby Jesus. She shrugged and said, "I know. She is waiting too."

⁴ Paul Berge, [Commentary on John 1:6-8, 19-28](#), December 2008

⁵ Karoline Lewis, [Commentary on John 1:6-8, 19-28](#), December 2011

⁶ Anne Hillerman, *The Sacred Bridge*, 2022

⁷ Used by permission from Nell Noonan, Dec. 13, 2023

Like us. Today, we, too, have an empty manger before us. As we look at this manger, it takes little imagination to name what is missing in our lives and our world. As we see this void, we acknowledge we do not have peace on earth, justice for the oppressed, political cooperation, reconciliation among families, or health and wholeness. All tears have not yet been wiped dry.

And yet, we know how this story turns out. We are not like the ancient Israelites who had a hard time discerning who Jesus was because he was so different from what many expected. We are not like John the Witness who only knew that one greater than he was coming. We know how this story goes.

Next Sunday, one of the youngest members of our congregation will be placed in this manger in their first starring role in their young life (with an attentive parent quite nearby). Gathered around will be Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, and wise ones. Maybe even the sheep will stay to take a look. On Christmas day, Nell's granddaughter awakened the family running through the house shouting, "Baby Jesus is here; Baby Jesus is here." She paid no heed to the gifts from Santa or an overflowing stocking. Her first awareness was that the manger was no longer empty. "Baby Jesus is here." Nell replied, "Yes, dear, he is here." Only a week from now, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus with songs and smiles, prayers and praise. Maybe someone will even run through the house with shouts of joy!

Beyond next week, beyond Christmas, we know how the story goes. It is the story of Jesus healing and teaching, dying and rising to new life. It is the story of the winds of the Spirit enlivening the church and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. And it is a story that is unfinished. A story that points to what is yet to come.

So today, as we look at this empty manger, acknowledging all that is not yet here, we look not with despair, but with hope. We stand here reminding ourselves and confidently bearing witness to each other and to the world that this void is not the end of the story. We know what is coming.

Friends, what is coming is good. Oh, so very good.

Thanks be to God. Amen.