

A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister,
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Before anybody heard of Jesus there was a man named John. John was the only child of Elizabeth and Zechariah. He was a cousin of Jesus. His parents had been childless for years. As they grew older they began to despair of ever having children. This was long before the days of fertilization clinics that help couples have babies. But one day an angel appeared to Zechariah and told him he was going to be a father. Now let me say a word about angels. I believe in angels. Just as I believe in many other things I can't see -- like atomic particles -- I believe in angels. Angels don't play a large role in my beliefs but I believe in angels -- messengers from God. Well an angel appeared to Zechariah when he was serving as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. The angel told him that he and his wife were going to have a child. Zechariah didn't believe the angel at first. "You've got to be kidding," he said. He laughed in disbelief. That miffed the angel so the angel told Zechariah he'd lose his voice until the baby was born. Now we all know how important a voice is to a preacher or a priest. So Zechariah was put out of commission for about nine months. By that time, Zechariah had come to believe the angel. He called his son "John" as the angel had instructed him to do in the first place. John was born about the same time as Jesus was born.

We don't know a thing about John's childhood. After his birth we don't hear about him for thirty years. When John was about thirty years old he burst upon the scene and attracted a rather large following. The Biblical writers take pains to say that John didn't want disciples -- he simply wanted to point people to Jesus. He was merely a voice. He was a lonely voice crying in the wilderness; a voice bearing witness to the light that was coming into the world. The story of John the Baptist as portrayed by the Gospel of John teaches us several lessons.

First, all of us, as Christians, are sent by God to point to Jesus. We're like John who was sent by God as a witness, to testify to Jesus. I want you to think of someone who pointed you to Jesus. The person I'm thinking of didn't try to impress me with how good or religious or moral he was. He merely pointed to Jesus. As I got to know him, he made it clear that there were many things in his life he wasn't proud of and that, apart

from Christ, he'd have been in the dark. Many of us can identify someone in our life who, like John the Baptist, pointed us to Christ. They never claimed to be anybody special. They were ordinary people sent by God to tell us about Jesus. All of us are sent by God into our neighborhoods to point to Jesus. We're not sent to bear witness to ourselves – how orthodox we are, how pure we are, how good we are. When we point to ourselves we become self-righteous. We're called to point others to Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus is the Light of the World. One of the most famous pictures of Jesus is a 19th century painting called "The Light of the World" by Holman Hunt. Hunt portrays Jesus standing before a closed door in the dark holding up a lantern. The lantern beautifully illuminates the face of Jesus. Jesus is knocking on the door, waiting for someone to open the door and invite him in. "The Light of the World" is one of the most popular paintings in the world. If you saw it you'd recognize it immediately. In the last 2000 years, countless people have found Jesus to be the light of the world. They've opened the door of their hearts to Jesus and invited him in.

Thirdly, Jesus often stands unrecognized in our midst. John the Baptist said, "Among you stands one whom you do not know." Jesus so often stands in our midst and we don't recognize him. Several weeks ago, in the Gospel lesson, we heard Jesus says, "I was naked and you clothed me. I was in prison and you visited me." People respond by saying, "When did we ever see you naked or in prison? We don't remember seeing you." Jesus claims to have been in their midst and yet they didn't recognize him. They didn't know him. So Jesus says to these people in whose presence he was standing unknown, "In as much as you did it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it unto me." On the other hand, Jesus will say to others, "I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink." And the people say, "When was that? We never saw you. If we had seen you and known it was you we would have visited you and clothed you - but we didn't know that was you." And Jesus says to them, "In as much as you didn't do it until one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you didn't do it to me. In other words, Jesus often stands in our midst as one we do not know or recognize.

Now think of what I've said so far. It's our job – to point others, not to ourselves, but to Christ. The Advent and Christmas season is a time people are most likely to see Jesus as the Light of the world and most

vulnerable to responding to an invitation to go to church with you. We see this in our attendance. The attendance always goes up during Advent. For most churches the largest attendance of the year is not Easter, but Christmas Eve. For the last several years we've had over 500 people in attendance on Christmas Eve if you count both services. That's over twice as many people who usually attend. People who aren't particularly religious are quite likely willing, at Christmas, to go with you to church. We're called to be modern day John the Baptists. John the Baptist didn't point to himself. He pointed to Jesus. He didn't try to impress people with how religious, intellectual, ethical or what a hard worker he was -- he merely bore witness to the Light.

He was a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice crying in the darkness. Many people feel we're living in darkness. The future is dark. Will there be war? Will the stock market become bullish again? What will my health be like in the New Year? Will terrorists strike again? Many people feel they're in the dark concerning God. The Christmas story tells us of a God who left the realms of endless life to come into the darkness of the world to give us light -- so that we might know God really loves and cares for us -- so that we might trust that God will win in the end. There's no story ever told that's more appealing to skeptical people.

Let us pray in words crafted by William Willimon: Lord, we are frightened of the dark. Don't leave us in the darkness. We stumble, lose our way, can't see others, or even ourselves in the dark. Lord, shine in our world; be bright in our lives. Radiantly beam into the darkened corners of our souls and give us light, give us hope, give us life. Lord, we are here this day to worship you, drawn toward your light. Don't abandon us to the darkness. Shine. Amen.