



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Advent 3: Year B (12/17/2017)

Gospel Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sermon Title: “Signposts”

Well, he’s back for a second consecutive week. John the Baptist thunderously roared at us last Sunday from the pages of Mark’s Gospel. As Pastor Lynn noted, John comes to us every Advent with an important but often unpopular word: “REPENT.” And as Pastor Lynn explained, John’s call to repent is a call to *turn*, and an invitation to correct our course, to move, and to change. Repentance is what happens when we honestly assess where we are, candidly admit that we are off-course, humbly confess our sins, and then resume our journey in a new direction, uplifted by the promise of wholeness, holiness, joy, fulfillment, and new life. Repentance is at the heart of what John the Baptist *says* in Mark’s Gospel.

Today, however, we gain a slightly different view of John the Baptist, this time through the perspective of the Gospel of John. For me, this version of John the Baptist is less noteworthy for what he *says* and more important for what he *does*. Here, we see John the Baptist witnessing and testifying. These are words that John’s Gospel uses nearly ten times more frequently than the other three Gospels combined. Being a witness and testifying is central to John’s Gospel, and the most powerful example of that is John the Baptist.

We see this most explicitly in the second half of today’s Gospel. Representatives of the Pharisees have shown up at the river’s edge where John is baptizing. They viewed themselves as “God’s watchdogs” – an elite group of highly educated and ultra-pious guardians of the faith. They were there to ascertain if John was friend or foe. And so they peppered him with questions. *Who* are you? *Why* are you baptizing people? And *what* is your purpose? John’s response was that they were focusing on the *wrong guy* and asking the *wrong questions*.

You see, John the Baptist knew that truth, life, hope, forgiveness, and salvation could not be fully revealed in *mere questions*. Those things could only be fully revealed in a *person*: Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. And so if the *word* we associate with John is “*repent*,” the *action* that best characterizes John is *pointing*. Everything he did and said *pointed* to *Jesus*. And John calls *us* to do the same.

As a seminarian and then as a pastor I accumulated shelves of books about preaching. How to *research* a sermon, how to *construct* a sermon, how to *deliver* a sermon – it’s all there. But the combined wisdom of all those books is a tiny fraction of the wisdom encompassed in one single picture that hangs in my office.

Perhaps you’ve noticed it on my wall. It’s a reproduction of a portion of the Wittenberg Altarpiece, a multi-panel painting completed in 1547 by Lucas Cranach the Elder. It’s right

behind the altar in the Wittenberg City Church in Germany. On the far left of the picture is a crowd of people who are in worship, sitting in pews. On the far right, is Martin Luther, at the place I think he loved the most – the pulpit – doing the thing I think he enjoyed the most – preaching. His right arm is extended as he dramatically points to the focal point at the very center of the painting – Jesus Christ on the cross. That is the task of *anyone* who takes the pulpit – to point rigorously and relentlessly to Jesus Christ. That is our calling as preachers. And that is our calling as *disciples* too. *All of us* are called to point to Jesus in *everything* we say and do, because he is the source of life, peace, wholeness, and salvation.

What in our world points to Jesus? Some might argue that the greatest signpost to Jesus is nature. We've all heard people claim that they've had a deeper and more meaningful experience of God *out in the world* than they do within the *walls of a church*. I can understand that to a degree. In the glory of a sunset; in the grandeur of a woodland hike; in the vibrant beauty of a persistent little wildflower; in the intoxicating aroma of lavender and lilacs; and in the silence and purity of a fresh snowfall, I have sensed the presence of God and felt the awe of being in God's creation.

But that is not enough. As the New Testament repeatedly shows, even the demons felt and acknowledged the divine presence and existence of Jesus. But that alone did not make them disciples. We need *more* than mere *information*. We need *transformation*, and that comes when we are pointed to the love and mercy of Jesus, who is the only force in the universe that can save us and turn sinners into saints. So where can I find a signpost pointing me to *that* Jesus?

In my experience – and I suspect this is true for you as well – the most effective and inspiring signposts pointing me to my loving, merciful savior Jesus have always been *other people*. Some of those people are from ancient days. I read the psalms of David and the letters of Paul and I am *driven to Jesus*. Or I examine the lives of great exemplars of the faith like Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and I am *drawn to Jesus*. But many of the sacred signposts who have made a decisive difference in my life are common, ordinary people, not celebrity saints. As you might anticipate, in my life many of those people have been clergy, like Pastor Andrew Carlsson, who planted the very first seeds in me of a vocation to ministry... Pastor Jonathan Vogel, whose openness, hospitality, and simple wisdom propelled me to seminary... and Pastor Teddy Benson; he's approaching 90 and is in declining health, and yet he faithfully leads a tiny Swedish American congregation in worship every Sunday in rural McKean County. These pastors have all humbly and lovingly pointed me to Jesus with their lives.

You too are called to be a signpost pointing everyone around you toward Jesus. Oh I know... I can almost hear the objections forming in your mind. "I'm no famous saint or theologically trained pastor. I'd make a lousy signpost!" If that's what you're thinking, then allow me to remind you about a little piece of my story. Most of you have heard at least a part of this, so I'll keep it brief.

In my life, the signpost that pointed the most vibrantly and explicitly to Jesus was a 10 day old baby who had no ability to *speak* about Jesus or to perform *any* inspiring acts of valor. All he could do was lie in my arms and look at me with his big brown eyes. I'm speaking of

course of my son Emilio, who was born into profound poverty in South Central Mexico. By all accounts he was probably going to be tossed in a dumpster like yesterday's garbage. As I held him that very first time, I realized how God had intervened and preserved him, even though he had little value in the eyes of the world. I held grace in my arms, and the ice that had formed around my heart finally began to melt, as that tiny little signpost warmed me with the light of Jesus. Oh sure, Jesus had loved me long before, when he claimed me, decades earlier, in the waters of baptism. But now I finally started to love him back. It set in motion a transformation I never could have envisioned or predicted, one that has carried me to this pulpit today.

Friends, if a 10 day old baby could point me to Jesus, just imagine what all of *you* can do, just by living simple lives marked, as Paul once wrote, by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By the grace of God, may we all be signposts pointing to Jesus. Amen.