

Pointing

This is the second week where we have a text about John the Baptist. Unlike in Mark's Gospel where there is an emphasis on the actions of John the Baptist, the emphasis in John's Gospel account is on John's encounter with the religious authorities, his identity and John's witnessing. Like Mark, John begins his Gospel account stating who Jesus is. John is a bit more 'poetic' than Mark is - Mark just states the identity of Jesus; where John takes us back to the creation story, makes the connection that Jesus is God. Throughout the rest of his Gospel account, John gives us the proof through signs that point to Jesus' identity. These signs include the miracles of Jesus and what Jesus does and teaches.

By making the connection to the creation story, John invites us to make other connections to the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish experience of God. The Jewish people trusted in God's promise that a Messiah would be sent to the people and they were on the lookout for this Messiah. However, there had been many self-proclaimed Messiahs who turned out to be false Messiahs which resulted in harsher conditions for the people. So, whenever the religious authorities heard of someone being described as a Messiah, they needed to check it out to determine the authenticity of the claim. They had to make sure that it was a legitimate claim, otherwise, there would be dire consequences for them & the people. That is why they sent out people to question John the Baptist.

This conversation centers more on who John knows he is not, rather than who he is. John says that he is not the Messiah; he is not Elijah - the prophet who was expected to return prior to the coming of the Messiah; and he is not the Prophet, the one like Moses that Moses promised God would send to the people.

John the Baptist is simply a man who is giving witness to God. John does what the prophets before him had done - call the people to repentance, to turn back to following God's ways. In all of this, John points to one who is greater than he is. Looking at the ranking of beings, starting with God, the prophets were considered the connection between God and humanity. If John is saying that there is someone greater than him who's coming after him, then it can only be one person - the Son of God.

In his Gospel account, John makes connections to the past. Right at the opening of his account, the connection is made to the creation by beginning the same way that the Old Testament begins, "In the beginning." Another connection is made to the story of the Fall, though it is more subtle. It is a connection of pointing. When confronted about his identity and his actions, John the Baptist points to someone greater than he is - he points to Jesus. When Jesus does a miracle, Jesus points to God as the source of it. This makes a contrasting connection with the Adam & Eve story in the Garden of Eden. After they ate the fruit, God asked Adam about his actions, if he ate the fruit. Adam replies by pointing to Eve, telling God that the woman God gave him, gave him the fruit to eat. Eve, in turn, points to the snake, saying the snake tricked her. Each one points further away from God. John the Baptist and Jesus, however, reverses that by pointing back to God. John points to Jesus as someone greater than him and Jesus points to God "blaming" God for the miracle.

In fact, in all the readings this morning, the authors point to God or Jesus. Isaiah, in this 'Servant Song' points to the Messiah as one who will deliver justice and hope to the afflicted. Paul, as always, points to Jesus as the One through whom we are given salvation.

All this pointing leads to the question of where do we point? As both a 'saint and a sinner,' there are times when we point either away from God or towards God. There are many forces in this world that try to convince us to look towards them for what we need. At this time of year, we hear this a lot through ads telling us what we need for Christmas. These ads try to convince us that if we get this particular product, our lives will be fulfilled. This being a time of coming up on national elections, we will hear candidates try to convince us that they are the only ones who can solve the problems of the country and our own problems, that no other candidate would be able to do what they can for us. We hear of people selling products or services that provide a healthier life or a better life than what we can get anywhere else. Sooner or later we will find out that they cannot give us what they promise or what we need. Most times, we find that they only take from us, leaving us without hope. However, as Paul reminds us in the second reading, Jesus & God are always true to their word. It is when we look to the Creator that we can always rely on the promises that are made to us.

One other note about the reading from Thessalonians. The verses "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" almost makes it sound as if it is God's will for us to have bad circumstances. While there are passages that indicate that God does cause bad things to happen to people, I do not think this is what Paul is saying. Paul is of the opinion, I think, that God only wants the good things for us. Paul assures us in these verses that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in we can be confident of the presence of God being with us. That is, God is with us in good circumstances, bad circumstances and any other kind of circumstances in between. Therefore, we should stay focused on God, rejoicing that God is with

us, always praying and giving thanks. We can give thanks even while we are in dire circumstances because, like it indicates in the Psalm and Paul tells us later, that we can have the confidence that God will come through for us. We can trust in God and Jesus that we can point in their direction and say that they are to 'blame' for us coming through those circumstances.

As we make our final preparations for this Advent season, may we find time to pause and reflect on the words of Scripture that encourage us to look towards Jesus, confidently hoping in Him in whatever situation we are facing, knowing that Jesus will keep his Word. May the Holy Spirit lead us to point others to Jesus.

YouTube links:

Gospel and sermon: <https://youtu.be/JyGwh7OL9tk>

Service: <https://youtu.be/2yppBLVfKzE>