

“Pointing Beyond Ourselves”

“He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

“You are here.”

Many shopping centres and office buildings have directories at their entrances that guide people to their desired destination. In order to gain some perspective on the location of their store or office, the directory will often point to the location of the directory so that its viewers can understand where they are presently standing and where they want to go. These directories point beyond themselves in order to assist patrons in arriving at the place they want to be within that building.

We encounter many signs and directories that are meant to assist us in our travels and in navigating our way to our desired destinations. Street signs inform us of when we are to turn onto another road, how far it is to the next city, and where we can and cannot park once we arrive. Ushers in theatres and arenas assist us in finding the correct seat location that is printed on our tickets. In larger venues such as summer festivals or sports stadiums, parking attendants use flashlights with orange tips to point us to a parking place. Having someone or something to point beyond itself assists us in navigating unfamiliar paths so that we might arrive safe and sound at the place we truly want to be.

In today’s Gospel lesson, we meet someone who functions in the role of pointing beyond himself to the place and person that people are desiring to be. John the Baptist plays a major role in our Advent story of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; in Mark’s Gospel, he is the fulfillment of the prophetic promise of *“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:3). On the occasion of his circumcision and naming, his father Zechariah sings to his infant son that *“you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.”* (Luke 1:76-77). On the banks of the Jordan River, John calls the people to prepare themselves for *“one who is more powerful than I [who] is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* (Matthew 3:11). John the Baptist calls us in the season of preparation to prepare ourselves for the coming of our long-awaited Saviour.

John plays a significant role in all four Gospels, including the Gospel According to John; but his role in the Fourth Gospel differs from the way he is presented in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). John is never identified as “the Baptist” in the Fourth Gospel, nor is he ever called the forerunner of Jesus. John has one function in this Gospel: to witness to Jesus. The Evangelist tells us more about who

John wasn't than who he was: he wasn't the light, he wasn't the Messiah, he wasn't Elijah, and he wasn't the prophet. John came *"as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."* (John 1:7-8). John's role is to point people to Jesus; his "testimony" ("witness," *martyria*) to Jesus will lead others to faith, but in his encounter with the religious authorities it will also be offered as if it were evidence in a trial. In his interrogation by this official delegation from the religious establishment, one question dominates: *"Who are you?"* The issue of John's identity must be resolved before the central question of the Gospel – Jesus' identity – can be addressed. In confessing that *"I am not the Messiah,"* John provides a contrast with Jesus' statements about his identity later in the Fourth Gospel, when he repeatedly identifies himself beginning with the words "I am":

- "I am the bread of life." – 6:35
- "I am the light of the world." – 8:12
- "I am the good shepherd." – 10:11
- "I am the resurrection and the life" – 11:25
- "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." – 14:6

As John denies that he is the Messiah, he also denies that he is either Elijah or "the prophet," figures upon whom some of the messianic expectations of Judaism came to rest:

- "As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven." – 2 Kings 2:11.
- "Lo, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes." – Malachi 4:5.
- "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." – Deuteronomy 18:15.

After hearing John deny that he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet, the religious authority demand an affirmative answer as to his identity: *"Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* (1:22). John's answer to the challenge to his identity as well as his authority and reasons for baptizing shifts the focus away from baptism to his role as testifying to and pointing to Jesus:

- "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." – 1:26-27.

Shortly after this encounter with the authorities, John is standing with two of his disciples when he sees Jesus walking by and declares to them, *"Look, here is the Lamb of God!"* (1:36). When his two disciples hear this, they follow Jesus, and John

soon fades from the Gospel story (the account of his martyrdom is found in Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29) because he has fulfilled his role in testifying and pointing to Jesus, *“the true light, which enlightens everyone, [that] was coming into the world.”* (1:9).

John the Baptist’s role of pointing beyond himself to Jesus is the role that the Church of Jesus Christ continues to play in every generation. The church does not exist for itself; its mission is to point beyond itself to the one who has called the church into existence to be a light to the nations. Light does not exist for its own sake; the purpose of light is to illuminate our surroundings so that we can see reality more clearly. Our call is to *“let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16). The mission of the Church is to continue to “testify to the light,” to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, to be the people in this world who are pointing others in the direction of our Lord and Saviour so that they too may follow the one who is *“life, and the life was the light of all people.”* (1:4).

- “My favourite definition of the church comes from Karl Barth, who said, ‘[The Church] exists ... to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world’s] own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise ... Having experienced the grace of God ourselves, we wanted to dispense it to others, free of charge, no strings attached, as grace always comes. The church, I have learned, can indeed be a new sign radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner, and contradict it in a way which is full of promise. For this reason, church is worth the bother.’ – Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*

As the church exists to point beyond itself to the Lord and Saviour who comes to us in this season of expectation and promise, so does its Gospel message point us from the place we are to the place we want to be. While mall directories may indicate that “you are here,” that is not the place where anyone wants to be; it shows our current location in order to guide us to a more desirable destination. As we hear the Gospel guide us toward our Lord today, we are in a place where none of us will be or may want to be for too long. We know that our life is temporary, that we will one day *“fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day,”* but the Gospel guides us to that place where nothing *“will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:39). We may hear these words this morning as we consider our present circumstances: lives filled with fear and uncertainty, homes that are sites of conflict rather than sanctuaries of peace and security, situations in which our past expectations were never fulfilled. Where we are today may not be the place we want to be, but as John pointed beyond himself to the one who is the Saviour of the world, so does the message he proclaimed point us beyond our present place in life to the place God is preparing for us and will call us to abide in when all that is promised will be fulfilled.

- “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?’ [Matthew 6:25]. That is what we shall do. When we forget who we are, our Lord reminds us: we are the people who live by the grace of God alone, by trusting in God’s providence and by remembering that we are more, far more, than what we consume or wear or where we live. We may care for ourselves and we may care for others, but it is God who cares for us all, and none of us is home yet.” – Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*.

You are here.

No one spends much time at a directory; their function is merely to guide us from that location to the place we want to be. It is a temporary stop on a longer journey; and such is the place in which we find ourselves today. No matter how long we may be “here,” wherever we find ourselves in this life, it is merely one stop on our journey to our eternal home, the house with “*many dwelling places*” that the who declares that “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*” has prepared for us and “*will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*” (John 14:1-6). The message of the Gospel – to which John the Baptist, the apostles, and the Church of Jesus Christ testify and witness – points us beyond ourselves to the place to which our Lord will one day call us, our eternal home. While we are here, none of us is home yet; but the Word points us to the way where we will find the truth that will lead us to eternal life – and calls us to point beyond ourselves so that others may also find their way home. Amen.