

"Just a Voice"

Rev. Peter Bynum
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⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. . . . ¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

If we were reading this introduction to John the Baptizer in either Matthew or Mark, the story would have been laced with locusts. Both of those evangelists go out of their way to tell us about this peculiar aspect of John's diet – the fact that he lived on a menu of locusts and wild honey. As weird as this diet sounds, a locust is one of just a handful of insects that are permissible to eat according to Leviticus 11. In fact, I recently learned that some of the best restaurants in Israel have proudly added locusts their menus. Chef Moshe Basson, who runs the renowned Eucalyptus restaurant in Jerusalem, likes to boil his locusts, clean them off, and then roll them in a mixture of flour, coriander seeds, garlic and chili powder before deep-frying them.¹ This insect entrée came into vogue a few years ago when an unusually large wave of locusts descended upon the area around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Some brave, committed Israelis figured that the best way to decrease the annoying locust population was to eat them. It makes you wonder if Pharaoh and the Egyptians thought of this strategy when Moses sent the locusts in, or maybe they just thought twice about it and said, "Nah, we'll just take the plague."

Anyway, Matthew and Mark thought the thing about the locusts was a noteworthy detail, probably because it was so weird. It was just one more thing that set John apart. Like his camel-hair jacket, his leather belt, and his bizarre life in the wilderness, the locusts were a detail that Matthew, Mark and Luke used to prove that John the Baptizer was distinctly **not** like us. They cast him as that odd, slightly disheveled, but very passionate guy in the subway tunnel holding a crudely crafted cardboard sign with "Repent" painted on it. We want to rush past him to get aboard the Christmas train, but he refuses to make that easy for us. We brush past him, but it is uncomfortable, perhaps because we suspect that, if we dare to stop and listen, he might say something that speaks directly to our greatest spiritual insecurities, one of those sensitive places in our lives that need the most healing.

However, the thing that sets John apart to the greatest degree — the most distinctive trait of his "otherness" — is not the locusts. It is his identification as "The Voice." Isaiah's prophecy had foretold that a voice would rise up to announce the coming of the Messiah — a voice calling from the wilderness that the world should prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3). The gospels all associate John with that voice. "This is the one," Matthew says, pointing directly at John. "This is the one of

¹ Cordelia Hebblethwaite, "Eating locusts: The crunchy, kosher snack taking Israel by swarm," <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21847517>, accessed December 12, 2017.

whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Matthew 3:3). Matthew's gospel would even go on to elevate John to an elite, almost unattainable human status, reporting the words of Jesus that, "among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptizer" (Matthew 11:11).

And here again in the Gospel of John, we get this same message. As people pressed him on who he was, he answers "I am The Voice." If we look a bit harder, however, we see that this gospel paints a very different portrait of John the Baptizer. For one thing, there are no locusts. There is no mention at all of John's bizarre diet, strange clothes, or hermit-like existence. Instead of distancing John from our experience, or elevating his legend beyond our reach, the Gospel of John seems intent on bringing this human figure back down to earth. In the Gospel of John, the Baptizer John is merely a man.

Consider, for example, the way the gospel introduces Jesus and the way it introduces John. In this book known for the "I am" sayings of Jesus, the identity of the Savior is unveiled in lofty and powerful metaphorical terms: "I am the Light;" "I am the Way;" "I am the Bread of Life;" "I am the Gate;" "I am the Good Shepherd;" "I am the True Vine;" "I am the Resurrection and the Life." With respect to John, however, the gospel of John strikes a clear contrast with Jesus. To the question, "Who are you?" John replies with a list of "I am *nots*." "I am not the Messiah," he says. "I am not Elijah." "I am not the prophet." John is not the Light. He is merely the one who testifies to the Light, the one who has come to prepare the way for the Light. Amid all of these "I am nots," the only "I am" that John gets is "I am the voice."

Notably, and this is a key point for this sermon, John did not really get that one either. Despite the translation we have before us, John does not actually say "I am the voice," because in the Greek text, there is no definite article. There is no "the" in front of the word voice. Many translations, like the one we read this morning, choose to include the word "the" anyway, probably because Matthew, Mark and Luke clearly identified John as *The* Voice, the first and foremost witness to the incarnation of God. But other translations, staying closer to the original Greek, have John answer the question "Who are you?" with the response "I am *a* voice."

My suspicion is that the author of this gospel did this on purpose. It seems more consistent with John's "I am nots," his denials of messianic and prophetic status. It is as if this gospel did not want us to think that what John did was so out of reach. If John is "The Voice," then that would mean we could not hope to share that voice, or even emulate his voice. The role of The Voice would be taken, like a single gold ring that only John stands tall enough to grasp. But if John is simply "*a* voice," then that means there may be others. If John is just one voice, then perhaps we might follow his example of witness and proclamation. Perhaps we too could call on the world to prepare the way of the Lord. Like John, we are not the Messiah. We are not Elijah. We are not the light. But perhaps we, like the moon, could be witnesses and reflectors of the light, just as John the Baptizer was.

With this simple change, the role that John the Baptizer fills is suddenly much more accessible for you and me. John Wesley said it this way: it is "as if [John] had said, 'Far from being Christ, or even Elijah, I am *nothing but a voice*: a sound that so soon as it has expressed the thought of which it is the sign, dies into air, and is known no more.'"² John's voice wasn't supernatural. It didn't echo off the mountains in perpetuity any more than your voice or my voice would. His was just one human voice, trying its best to be faithful and true. And, as the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon adds, he wasn't even voicing to new material. The things John said were not original; they came directly from the prophets and the scriptures. "Our words," Spurgeon says, "what are they? They are but air."³ God's Word, on the other hand, will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8). So Spurgeon concludes, we don't need to fret over writing a new script for our message. The words have already been given to us. We just need

² John Wesley, Wesley's Notes <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.v.ii.html>, accessed on

³ Charles Spurgeon, "The Simplicity and Sublimity of Salvation," <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons38.xxiii.html>.

to give them voice in our own way. As Spurgeon says, "May we continually be lending [our] voice to the great Words of God that have gone before!"⁴

The good news is that this ring is something that is clearly within our grasp. At times, the work of discipleship can seem overwhelming. The needs of the world seem so great. The brokenness of the world seems so extensive. The violence of the world seems so pervasive. We wonder what we could possibly do to make a difference. But then the gospel of John gives us this portrait of another man named John. He was just a man. He was not the Messiah. He was not the second coming of Elijah. He was not the light. He was just a voice, just someone who shared the promise that something wonderful, someone wonderful, was coming into the world, and that somehow, through his influence, everything broken would be made whole, every pain would be healed and every tear would be wiped away.

There is an old story about a man at sea who became very seasick. As the ship heaved to and fro in heavy seas, he retired to his bunk to try and find some relief. If you've ever been seasick, you know that there is really very little that you can do except suffer through it. And, as this poor man was suffering through it, word still found its way down through the state rooms that someone had fallen overboard. A desperate call went out to everyone on board to come and help the crew in the search. In his condition, the seasick man felt completely powerless. He could barely move his head without feeling terrible. Still, he felt the need to try something, anything, to help. He pulled his suitcase over and found his flashlight. Flicking it on, he held it up to the porthole. But as soon as he tried to sit up to look out, an intense wave of nausea knocked him right back down.

Fortunately, other searchers were more successful in their efforts, and the drowning man was found just in time. The next day, when the seasick man had recovered enough to venture back up on deck, he ended up sharing a cup of coffee with the fortunate soul who had been plucked from the water. "I just kept slipping below the waves," the rescued man said. "I had just gone under for the second time, and was about to go down again, probably for the last time. With the only energy I had left, I thrust my hand up out of the water one last time. And this time, someone grabbed it. Before I knew it, I was being hauled up into a lifeboat."

"But here's the odd thing," the man continued. "The crew said they had not seen any sign of me until that last moment when they saw my hand break the surface. According to them, at that exact moment someone shined a light through a porthole in the ship, and that beam of light fell directly on my hand." It had seemed to be such a small, even meaningless thing to do, to hold up a light, but it had been the effort that made all the difference.⁵ As Edward Everett Hale, the brilliant 19th century pastor, once said, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

The kind of witness that John the Baptizer offered to Christ may seem out of reach, but the gospel of John tells a different story. It gives us the story of a man, a human being, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to something wonderful that was coming into the world. He was not the Messiah. He was not Elijah. He was not the light. He was just a voice... one human voice... a fleeting breath that was quickly overcome by the much mightier wind of the Holy Spirit. Like John, we cannot do everything, but we can do something. We can be a voice of faith that something better is on the way. We can be a voice for the coming of peace. We can be a voice for the advent of hope. We can be a voice proclaiming the triumph of God's love over the powers and principalities of this world. We have the words. They have already been given to us. So in these Advent days and beyond, may we simply lift our own voices to proclaim that Word, and so shine our own beams of God's light into a dark and stormy world. May God inspire that kind of witness in each of us. **Amen.**

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Witnessing," <http://www.sermonillustrations.com>, accessed December 12, 2017.