

Last week, we talked about the importance of how we begin things, and how the book of John takes us back to the very foundation of the world, and to the fact that Jesus is one with God, the creator of the universe. That is the premise for everything that follows in this book. He wasn't just a good teacher, or a miracle worker – he was the Son of God, who existed in eternity before being born as a baby and living life here on earth.

This morning we're jumping forward to earth time, picking up the story with a character named John the Baptist. Just so there's no confusion, the Apostle John who is given credit with writing this book is a different John than John the Baptist. Just like today, it was a common name. So when John speaks highly of John, you can know he's not talking about himself.

### **John 1:19-51**

*Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"*

*He said, "I am not."*

*"Are you the Prophet?"*

*He answered, "No."*

*Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"*

*John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

*Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"*

*"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."*

*Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he*

*who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*

Quite honestly, the thought of talking about John the Baptist this week didn't inspire me all that much at first, and I'll tell you why: For the last year, we've been in preparation mode. We've been talking about and planning for the future. We got to last week and it felt so good to finally be at our official start and feel like yes! We're done preparing. Let's get on with this.

And then who comes along in the story but John the Baptist, whose main message is "Get prepared!" And in my mind I'm saying – but I'm tired of preparing! Let's get on with things!"

Well, you know when there's something in Scripture that is uncomfortable or that gets under your skin, chances are God is wanting to use it to shape you. And once again, as always, the more I stayed in that one spot, the more I saw that John really does have something for us at this very point in time. Because in many ways, John represents the role of the church in relationship to Jesus. I titled this morning "What you see is what you get," because much of John's message is tied up with him being able to see things other people did not. This will become more clear as the story unfolds.

We don't get the full background on John the Baptist in this version of the story. When we piece the various parts together, we find that we know quite a bit about him. We know that he was actually a cousin of Jesus on his mother's side. We know that even before he was born, God had indicated to his parents that he had a special role to fulfill in life.

Other parts of the Bible tell us he was quite an interesting looking character – wearing some kind of clothes made from camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey in the desert. He stuck out as unusual, both in the way he looked and what he was doing. He was out in the wilderness, preaching that people needed to get their hearts ready for God to do something. Then he was baptizing them in the Jordan river. That wasn't a typical Jewish custom.

This was an unusual guy. There weren't a lot of people like him at the time. And he was attracting a great deal of attention. People from all over were flocking to hear him and see what he was doing. For some people it was probably like going to watch a freak show. "What are you doing today? Oh, I don't know. I thought maybe I'd pack a lunch and go check out that guy who's supposed to be pretty fun to watch out in the desert." Curiosity drove some people more than any spiritual desire.

That's true for the group we meet right at the beginning. The author refers to them as "the Jews of Jerusalem" – a term he will use frequently. We should probably clarify that the way he is using this isn't an ethnic slur. Jesus was Jewish, the author is a Jew, most of the first disciples were Jewish. He's not being anti-Semitic. He's using the term to talk about the establishment, both political and religious. The "Jews of Jerusalem" were

the authorities and leaders in power, and they frequently find themselves at odds with Jesus.

Here they are baffled by John. What is he doing? Who does he think he is? So they send some people to come talk to John.

John answers in a way that redirects their question: It's not about who I am. I'm just a voice. A voice saying to get ready, because God is going to show himself."

That answer doesn't satisfy them. "Then how come you're baptizing? If you're nobody special, what gives you the authority to do these kinds of things?"

And John again redirects them. "Look – I'm only using water. The person I'm trying to tell you about will literally baptize people with the Holy Spirit. I'm not even on the same plane as him, so stop worrying about what I'm doing and get focused on the person I'm telling you about."

Here's how it starts to become clear that John is like the church. We can think of John the Baptist as being the first example for us in Scripture of what it means to talk to people about Jesus. If there is anything today that makes Christians and non-Christians nervous and uncomfortable, it's the whole idea of what we call witnessing. Non-Christians are saying, "Believe what you want to believe and I'll believe what I want, but don't go too far to try to sell me on your religious experience." And in response, we Christians are afraid to say much, but we feel guilty for not saying anything and so we try extra hard and sometimes come across as even more awkward and forced.

John has a lot to teach us when it comes to talking about Jesus. Much of it can be summed up in what he saw. One of the best things is that **he saw himself in perspective**. Here he was a very famous man, a preacher who had devoted his life to God and who had sacrificed everything for the sake of his message. He had worked long and hard to get to the point where people listened to him and respected him and where he could command the attention of important people in Jerusalem. But he didn't ever mistake himself as being the important part of what he did. He kept pointing people to Jesus.

That's one of the tougher ones for me on a personal level. I don't mind doing things for God, but I would really like to get some of the credit. I like to do things that will make me look good. I am a people pleaser. I want to share the limelight, to have people hold me in high regard. That Jeff -- What a great guy. He works so hard, planting a church, keeping a day job.

It's really kind of an either-or proposition. Either I'm pointing to Jesus or I'm pointing to myself. I can't do both. John would say, get your eyes off of me. You think what I'm doing is significant? It's nowhere near what Jesus is going to do.

This summer, we took a family hike up to Twin Falls, up near Snoqualmie. To get down to the lower falls, you have to take this steep path that has 101 steps down to the

platform. As we were climbing back up, I was looking at the steps and thinking about how much work had gone into carving them out of the hill. Each one had to have been backbreaking, time intensive work.

Now I could stand here today and tell you how impressive it was that I walked down and back up all those stairs. It took a little huffing and puffing, considering I had to carry Annika most of the way. But really, walking on that path is nothing compared to the work that went into actually making the path.

John says, I'm just walking the path. Look at the one who is the path. Jesus said, I am the Way. I am the path. There is no comparison. As a church, we need to see ourselves with similar clarity and not stop short with people by saying, "Isn't this exciting? A new church? We're different. We're trying something innovative." We have to say, "You know what? The only reason we're here doing what we're doing is because of the amazing way Jesus has transformed our lives." We point them on to him.

This isn't to say that John had a poor self-image or that to be a Christian you need to think you're a nobody. John knew he was called. Jesus talked about him as being one of the greatest humans who had ever lived. There was no denying his importance. John just had the clarity to recognize that his job was not to attract attention and keep it for himself; he was to push all that attention to Jesus.

Some of us may feel like we identify more with John's audience than with John himself. We come with a lot of questions. We're trying to make sense of it all. What's this new thing all about? If I had to translate John's conversation to New Day, I think he would be saying "Don't get sidetracked with the wrong questions. Focus your inquiries on Jesus himself rather than on vague spiritual experiences or church in general. Those can distract you from the main point."

So John had good perspective on himself. But John saw something else too, because **he saw past the surface**. He made an intriguing statement: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know." John told the crowd that Jesus was already there -- among them -- even though they didn't know him. John was preparing the way for the Lord, but it was a Lord who was already on the scene.

I had to replant some grass this month, patching some holes in my lawn. So I got this stuff that had the grass seed, the fertilizer and some mulch all in one mix. But before I could plant it, the instructions said I needed to prepare the soil. That meant breaking it up, turning it over so the grass seed would be able to have a place to hook in and grow.

I could have brought in a big load of topsoil and dumped it on top of my lawn, but that would have killed the grass that was already there. It didn't need new soil, so much as it needed the old soil prepared.

My point is this: Sometimes, when we are sharing Jesus with other people, we think we need to bring in new topsoil, when all we need is the seed. We don't recognize that God

has already got some grass growing in their lives, he's already at work. We would do better to pay attention to what is happening in the circumstances and experiences that they have been through, rather than bring in a load of unnecessary information.

Rebecca Manley Pippert tells the story of a time she was talking to a student at UC Berkeley.

Our conversation moved to whether we believed in God. It was an easy, almost casual talk. I began telling her about Jesus and she seemed interested. But as I became more enthusiastic about what it meant to be a Christian, she seemed to withdraw emotionally. Still I kept on talking about Jesus – for want of knowing what else to do. But even though my mouth kept moving, I was very aware that I was turning her off. So there I was, having a private conversation with myself, trying to figure out how to stop.

Suddenly I realized how ridiculous all this was, so I said, “Look, I feel really bad. I am very excited about who God is and what he's done in my life. But I hate it when people push religion on me. So if I'm coming on too strong will you just tell me?”

She looked at me in disbelief. “I can't believe you just said that. I never knew Christians were aware that we hate being recipients of a running monologue.”

Her response was perceptive. I didn't want to dump the gospel and she didn't want to be dumped on.

If we would just spend the time to turn over some of the ground in their lives that is already there, we would find that there's plenty of stuff for God to work with. It might just need to be softened up and exposed a bit.

Coming to a point of faith in Christ is not a random occurrence. If you're here as someone who is exploring what it means to be a Christian, the great news is that God is already working in your life, even though you don't know it. The fact that you are here points to that. He is doing the work of preparation. The question is, what is he needing to turn over and soften up in your heart? What needs to happen inside of you to make you ready to recognize him?

Sometimes we need other people to help us see Jesus. My kids have some of those I Spy books at home. When you first look at a page, all you see are lots of shapes and colors. Then if someone who knows what is in the picture says, “I spy a small globe,” you start looking for it until you find it. Once you know what to look for, you begin to see.

Part of our task is to point out what we see in someone's life. If there are events or circumstances where we can clearly see that Jesus is at work, we should highlight that. Or, if we know where he has done something in our lives, we share that so other people can look for similar activity in their own lives.

How did John recognize Jesus? It was a final thing that he saw: **He saw the Holy Spirit at work.** He saw the dove from heaven come down and land on Jesus, and that had been what God said would be the indicator.

The Holy Spirit is always the one who reveals Jesus to us.

**John 15:26**

*When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.*

The way we see where Jesus is at work is when we are listening to his Spirit. The religious leaders who came to John couldn't recognize Jesus. You would have thought if anybody could, it would have been them. But they weren't in tune with God's Spirit.

In his book, *Fresh Power*, Pastor Jim Cymbala writes these words:

*The very people who are thumping the Bible most vigorously are often the ones trying to have church without the Holy Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit sometimes gets a bad rap as some kind of powerful force that causes people to act crazy. Think of the movies or TV shows you've seen where someone wigs out in church and it's chalked up to them being "filled with the Spirit". But that's totally off base. The Bible calls the Spirit the Counselor or Guide or Teacher or Comforter. That's hardly the description of something that will make you lose all self control.

It was only thanks to the Holy Spirit that John could say with confidence what he knew about Jesus. The Spirit opened his eyes and freed John up to speak with boldness and to be specific about who Jesus was.

The point is that in order to recognize Jesus, we need to see the Holy Spirit. There won't be any doves anymore. It's on the inside. When we ask God to come into our lives, he does that literally by placing his Spirit in our hearts.

**2 Cor 1:21-22**

*He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

Once he's there, though, doesn't mean we always pay attention to him.

We have a very loud house, and sometimes it catches people off guard when they come over for dinner. I can be sitting at the table, having a conversation with someone, with one of my kids yelling for me from the other room. I won't consciously ignore them, but due to years of being yelled at by three kids, I can effectively tune it all out. But the person I'm talking to hasn't experienced it before, and they'll say to me, "Do you need to go help them?" At which point I realize I haven't been paying attention at all.

We can learn to effectively shut out the Spirit's voice. And he doesn't yell. Being in tune with the Spirit means being sensitive to those small tugs at our conscience, those proddings to pick up the phone and call someone, those little fleeting thoughts about people we need to pray for. When we shut those down, we miss the chance to see Jesus. We miss the chance to see him working. And that means we miss opportunities to point him out to other people.

Did you know that to this very day, there is still a group of people in Iraq and Iran that consider themselves disciples of John the Baptist? They trace their religious heritage all the way back to him. They never transferred their loyalties to Jesus. Quite frankly, I think if John heard that, he would be really saddened. Because he didn't consider himself the end of the story, but the beginning. He wanted to see people move ahead with their development into a relationship with Christ. And here's another way that John is like us. We're not just here to get people to go to church. It's great if they do. But you can be in the church a long time and never cross that line to a point of following Christ.

John wrapped up his response with these words: *I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.*

That's what we are. We are a people who have seen Jesus. And we can testify to the fact that he is the Son of God.

I want to spend some time doing that this morning. We don't normally end this way, but this story is crying out for it. I don't know what is going on in each of your lives, but I know two things for sure: One, is that in a group this size, there are stories of ways that Jesus has been seen, stories of where he has been active and you didn't even know it. That's what has brought this group together – we're people who have experienced that. The other thing I know is that there are people here looking desperately to see where he is working, who need to hear the stories you have to tell.

So I want to open it up for a few minutes to have people testify to what they have seen. Share with the group what you've been experiencing.

## SHARING

The truth is, God is never done preparing our hearts. The voice of John will be ringing in our ears until eternity, telling us we need to let God turn over the soil. What is he speaking to you about this morning? What does he want to break up and soften? The more we recognize what he's trying to do in our lives, the more we'll see who he is and who he wants us to become.

