

SERIES: Gospel of John: Seeing is Believing?
SERMON: *A Voice in the Desert*
SCRIPTURE: John 1:19-34
SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
DATE: August 21, 2011

As we get started I want you to think about a quote. “It is better to be ignorant and teachable than arrogant and enlightened.”

Last week I said the book of John is like an iceberg. John wants to take us below the surface to see the depths of the person of Jesus. When it comes to Jesus, there is more than meets the eye. We also said that the Gospel of John is like an ocean. It is shallow enough for a child to wade in and it is deep enough for an elephant to swim in. What this means is the Gospel of John is a great book for people just starting in the faith and a book that continues to baffle the most brilliant theologians. So, it’s a book for everybody, right? Well it’s a book for almost everybody.

I grew up in Garden City, home of the world’s largest municipal swimming pool. And every year when they drained the pool they let the elephants from the zoo swim in the pool as it was draining. As kids, we always enjoyed seeing this. But in the church this is a sad sight to see.

I run into people from time to time who might consider themselves elephants; they know a lot about the Bible. But they don’t want to swim in the ocean; they are content to swim in the big pool in Garden City (the big pool is big, but it’s no ocean). They feel they already know all there is to know about Jesus. Some may not know there is an ocean, some are simply more comfortable in the pool. Elephants who don’t want to swim in the ocean are people who like to keep Jesus in a box or above the surface. The book of John will frustrate you, if you find yourself in this position, because it will challenge you to go deeper at every turn.

It would be better to be a child wading in the ocean who wants to learn how to swim in the deeps than to be an elephant who would rather swim in the big pool. It is better to be ignorant and teachable than arrogant and enlightened. Wherever you are today, I want to challenge each of us to go deeper as we continue in the book of John.

The writer of the Gospel of John was John the Evangelist. We will spend a lot of time today talking about John the Baptist. This could be confusing. So to be clear, when I say John the Evangelist, I’m referring to the one who wrote the Gospel.

The purpose of the Gospel of John is for John the Evangelist to show his readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, so that his readers will believe in Jesus and have life in his name (20:31). He’s building a case to prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And he wants it to be a perfect case. He will show us 7 signs or miracles Jesus performed, he will tell us about 7 claims that Jesus made regarding himself, and he will call on 7 witnesses to testify concerning Jesus. The number 7 was considered the perfect number to John and his readers. So, he’s building the perfect case that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God in his Gospel. In our text this morning,

John 1:19-34, John the Evangelist calls John the Baptist as his first witness who will take the stand to testify concerning Jesus.

As I read the text notice what the witness says about himself and the what the witness says about Jesus.

John 1:19-34 (ESV)

¹⁹And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” ²²So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to 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.”

²⁴(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” ²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” ²⁸These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³²And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Verses 19-28 establish the *credibility* of John the Baptist as a witness. They tell us about John and why we should listen to his testimony. Verses 29-34 report the *testimony* of John the Baptist as a witness. They tell us about Jesus.

As we evaluate the witness and his testimony together, I invite you to evaluate the witness and his testimony personally. At the end of the sermon I will ask you to give a verdict concerning Jesus. In order to make an accurate assessment though you may have to wade out in the ocean with me for a little while.

THE CREDIBILITY OF THE WITNESS (19-28)

In verse 19 we are told about a delegation of priests and Levites sent by the religious leaders from Jerusalem to interrogate John the Baptist. What was John up to that would cause the religious leaders in Jerusalem to send their legal assistants on a two day journey to Galilee to investigate? John the Evangelist doesn't tell us here, but listen to what Mark records.

Mark 1:5-6 (ESV)

⁵All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt round his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

The reason the religious leaders from Jerusalem sent a delegation to interrogate John was probably because they were suspicious of John;¹ he was an enigmatic character who was attracting a lot of attention. So they ask him, "Who are you?" John the Evangelist uses John the Baptist's answers to establish the credibility of John the Baptist.

In answer to their question John starts by telling them who he is not; he gives them three denials.² I am not the Christ, I am not Elijah, and I am not the Prophet. For the sake of time, we will only look at the first of these denials.

John is not the Christ.

John the Baptist knew who he wasn't. He emphatically denies that he is the Christ; "*He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ'*" (v. 20). This shouldn't surprise us as we have already said a number of times that John the Evangelist is trying to prove that *Jesus* is the Christ. I think it is important before we go on to understand what the word "Christ" means, so that we can understand what John the Baptist is denying concerning himself and what John the Evangelist is affirming regarding Jesus.

First of all, Christ is not a name; it's a title. My name is Josh. My title is Pastor. My name is not Pastor Josh. The same is true for Jesus Christ. His name is not Christ; that's his title. His name is Jesus. So when we say Jesus is the Christ we are combining his name with his title.

Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah (see 1:4), which means Anointed One. Both Christ and Messiah mean the Anointed One. Those people who were anointed in the Old Testament were set apart by God for service. In the Old Testament there were three groups of people who were anointed, or set apart: kings, priests, and prophets.

Before Jesus came there had not been an anointed king or prophet for 400 years. But the Old Testament looked forward to a day when *the* anointed One (the Messiah) would come and save the Israelites. And in the 1st Century many Jews were expecting the Messiah to come, but not everyone understood who the Messiah would be. Would he be a king, a priest, or a prophet? Most expected the Messiah to be a king, a new King David. Some expected the Messiah to be a priest. Some groups even thought there might be two Messiahs – a kingly Messiah and a priestly Messiah. Little did anyone know that Jesus would be more than they ever imagined. We won't talk a lot about this today, but Jesus was actually prophet, priest, king, and a whole lot more. He was a savior, but not the kind of Savior the Israelites expected. As we continue to study John we will continue to see that with Jesus there is more than meets the eye.

¹ Craig Keener. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*.

² It is interesting that John the Evangelist records John the Baptists giving 3 denials at the beginning of his Gospel, then records Peter giving 3 denials at the end of his Gospel (chp 18).

Have you ever heard someone say, “Just give me Jesus; I don’t need a bunch of theology”? Well if Jesus is the Christ, you can’t have him without some theology.³ Christ is a loaded title that has deep roots in the Old Testament and many applications to our lives. To have a right relationship with Jesus we have to understand in some measure what his title means. To know Jesus as the Christ requires a little theological reflection; it will require wading out into the ocean a little bit.⁴ But the theological reflection is not limited to knowledge about God; it also requires knowledge of self. John the Baptist is a good model for us here. He knew he was *not* the Christ.

Dale Bruner tells the story of a child who comes home from Sunday school and his parent asks the child, “What did you learn in Sunday School?” The child responds by saying: “I learned about God.” So the parent digs a little deeper; “*What* did you learn about God?” To which the child responds with a profound answer: “I ain’t him.” Bad grammar, good theology.⁵ It is important to realize who we *are* and who we *are not*, if we are to have a right relationship with Jesus.

John knows who he isn’t: he’s not the Christ, but he also knows who he is. Look at verse 22. As you can imagine the delegation that was sent to question John the Baptist is frustrated by now. They’ve asked him who he is and all he has told them is who he isn’t. John’s answers weren’t good enough for them. “*So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’*”

In verses 20-21 John the Baptist gave 3 denials. In verses 23-28 he gives us 3 affirmations. Again, for the sake of time, we will simply look at one of them.

John points to the Christ.

John the Baptist knew who he was. In verse 23 he says, “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*” This is a reference to Isaiah 40:3. John is essentially saying I am the necessary forerunner to God’s Messiah – the one who will save Israel; I am the one who points to the Savior.

Isaiah 40 marks a major change in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah mainly expose Israel’s sin and announce God’s coming judgment – the Israelites would be carried off into captivity in Babylon.

Then we get to Isaiah 40:1 and the prophet says, “*Comfort, comfort my people.*” Isaiah 40 doesn’t cancel out the judgment, but it looks forward to a day when God’s people would be rescued from captivity. Then in Isaiah 40:3 we are told that before the Israelites could return from captivity there would be a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for a return.

It is important to realize that Isaiah 40 has two layers of fulfillment. The first is when a remnant returned to Jerusalem from the literal Babylonian captivity in the 5th Century B.C. But the prophecy didn’t reach its final fulfillment until John the Baptist came as a voice in the wilderness. He prepared the way for people who were in a spiritual wilderness and captivity to

³ Don Carson. *The Gospel According to John*.

⁴ See Michael Horton’s *The Christian Faith* for a good explanation of how Jesus is prophet, priest, king.

⁵ Don Carson. ID 5000 Biblical Theology and Interpretation

come back to God by calling them to repent. John prepared the way for the LORD to save his people. And as the book of John will continue to show us, we see Jesus is the promised Savior. John the Baptist was the necessary and promised forerunner who prepared the way for Jesus.

Last week I intentionally skipped over verses 6-8. I'd like to look at them now.

John 1:6-8 (ESV)

⁶*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*

He was *not* the light; he was *not* the Christ, and he knew it. He knew who he wasn't. But he also knew who he was. He was a witness to the light; his job was to point people to Jesus.

The best sermons have good illustrations. And the reason preachers use illustrations is to make the truth of a passage clear to their audience. However, some preachers are too good at giving illustrations. When an illustration is larger than life it can eclipse (or hijack) the truth they are trying to shed light on. An illustration is like a spotlight; it's not intended to be *in* the spotlight. John the Baptist got this! He was not the Christ! He was the spotlight that pointed to the Christ. Jesus was the one in the spotlight.

There is a current infatuation in the Evangelical movement with acts of justice and mercy on behalf of the poor and oppressed.⁶ And for the most part I'm excited about the work Evangelicals are doing to address the needs of the hurting world. However, I'm also concerned. I'm not concerned about the works of justice and mercy themselves that are being done in Jesus name. I'm concerned that we might become more excited about those works than the work of Jesus. I think there is a danger in each of us to focus more on ourselves and what we can do for Jesus than on what Jesus has done for us. We are not the Savior; Jesus is the Savior. Let us give more attention to the work of God in Christ than we give to the works of man.

Later in the service Zach and Jennifer O'Conner are going to share about their calling to medical missions in western Africa. They understand that they will not save anyone in Africa because they are not the Savior, but are servants of the Savior and they can point others to the Savior as they serve in Jesus name. The same is true for us. As you listen to their story remember you are not the Christ, your job is to point others to the Christ.

Transition: John the Baptist testified that he was not the Christ. He was a voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the Christ. But was this a good enough answer for those sent by the religious leaders?

No. They seem to completely dismiss what he just said. His answer didn't fit into their box. So they say to him, "*Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ nor Elijah, nor the Prophet*" (v. 25). John's answer is surprising. He says, "*I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am unworthy to untie*" (vv. 26-27).

⁶ Larry Osborne calls this the Bono factor.

It's as if John is saying, "You're missing the whole point!" They couldn't figure out who John was, but John wants them to figure out who Jesus is. John wants them to know Jesus. The whole purpose of John's testimony is not to point to himself, but to point to Christ. But if John doesn't fit into their box, then Jesus for sure won't fit into their box. John has authority, but his authority is to point to the one who has greater authority. John is not even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. John is like a slave in comparison to Jesus. But these elephants didn't want to swim in the ocean. They would rather swim in the pool. Neither John nor Jesus fit into their box. And so they fade out of the picture; in their frustration they disappear from the narrative.

But even if the credibility of John has not been established for the delegation, hopefully it has been established for those of us reading. John knows who isn't; he is not the Christ and he knows who he is; he is the one who points to the Christ. Now let's look at the testimony of the witness; what does John have to say about Jesus?

THE TESTIMONY OF THE WITNESS (29-34)

John the Baptist's testimony includes a number of truths about Jesus. We will simply look at two of them, starting in verse 29. *"The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"*

Jesus is the Lamb of God.

The Christ, or the Messiah, was supposed to save the people of God. Everybody expected that. But many were only expecting a new Davidic King who would defeat the Romans and drive out the sinful cultural norms of the Greeks. But John the Evangelist wants to show us that with Jesus there is always more than meets the eye.

Yes, he is the promised Davidic Messiah who will save the people of God. But the real problem was not the Romans or the Greeks. The real problem is the fact that we are all sinful. Jesus as the Christ ultimately saves his people from their sin. And he does this by becoming a sacrifice for their sin. The lamb was used in a number of places in the Old Testament as an acceptable sacrifice for sin. John the Evangelist uses John the Baptist's testimony to prove that Jesus is the new and perfect sacrifice for sin, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This becomes clearer as John's Gospel progresses and we see Jesus led to a cross where through his sacrificial death he became a rescue for sinners.

John the Evangelist is showing us that you can't fit the Messiah in a box. He doesn't meet our preconceived expectations. With Jesus there is more than meets the eye. And John the Baptist gets this. Look at verse 31. *"I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."*

John is saying that there was a time when he was ignorant; he didn't know Jesus. But he was teachable. He allowed God to show him who the Christ was. Look at verses 32-33. *"I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"*

John is the opposite of the religious leaders. They were experts, they were enlightened, but they were arrogant. Jesus didn't fit into their box and therefore they didn't come to know Jesus as the Christ. John on the other hand was ignorant at first, but teachable. At first he didn't know Jesus, but he allowed God to show him that Jesus was the Christ. He was humble; he was like a child who *wades* in the ocean, hoping to *swim* in the ocean someday. And because he was teachable he came to see Jesus more clearly and he came to know Jesus as the Christ, but that is not all.

Look at his final testimony concerning Jesus in verse 34. "*And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.*"

Jesus is the Son of God.

This is his final answer, his verdict. For John, Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. He believed this and had life in Jesus name. What is your final answer, your verdict?

We have seen that with Jesus there is more than meets the eye. There is more to him than what we find above the surface. John has taken us deep beneath the surface. But in order to see him for who he is we have to be willing to be teachable. You don't have to be super smart to know Jesus, but you have to be willing to learn. You can't keep Jesus in a box if you really want to know him and grow in your relationship with him. But knowledge of Jesus is not the only thing we need to know. We, like John the Baptist, also have to know ourselves; who we are and who we are not.

Sermon in a sentence: To grow in a personal relationship with Jesus we have to be willing to grow in our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of the Christ.

Maggie and I celebrated our 14th wedding anniversary on Tuesday. We don't have a perfect relationship by any means, but I can say that by the grace of God we have seen growth in our relationship. One of the key elements in our growing relationship is a growing knowledge of each other. I know Maggie now better than I ever have, but I also know myself better than I ever have. And when we're at our best, we're living our lives according to what we know about one another.

I have to understand that Maggie is first and foremost a Nave and very much like her dad, but she's also a Florence and very much like her mom. Being a Nave, she doesn't like to sit still for very long; she wants to be doing something. She would just assume be the first person to leave a party. I on the other hand am perfectly content to do nothing for long stretches of time. I would be the last to leave if I had my choice. This used to cause a lot of friction, but we've learned to live our lives according to what we know about the other person. So when we go to a party we simply take separate cars.

Being a Florence, Maggie is very compassionate and emotional (actually the emotional comes from both sides and is quite strong in her). What this means in real life is she is a feeler; she processes the world through her heart. I on the other hand am a thinker; I process the world through my head. If I'm not careful I can really crush her with my lack of sensitivity. I've had to learn to be more sensitive and she's had to learn to be more logical and have thicker skin.

The more we get to know one another, and the more we live appropriately within the knowledge we have about one another, the better our relationship is.

The same is true with a relationship with Jesus. If our relationship with Jesus is going to grow it will require a growing understanding of who we are and who Jesus is. I know it's not fun looking in the mirror and being honest about what we see there, but if we're going to grow in our relationship with Jesus we have to be like John the Baptist and know ourselves really well. And if Jesus is indeed the Christ we're going to have to do some work to find out more about what that means. It may require going deeper into the Bible than some may be comfortable with, but it is necessary if we want to grow in our relationship with Jesus.

In short, we are sinners, we are not the Savior and we are not the Lord. Jesus is the Savior, but he's not only the Savior, he's also the Lord. So when we try to live as though we're the Lord it's not going to go very well, and if we try to live our lives as though we're the Savior it's going to be very frustrating. Let's acknowledge that we are sinners in need of a Savior and that our role is to point others to Jesus the Christ.

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