



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Porchlight Prophets”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Isaiah 49: 1-7; John 1: 29-37

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As some of you know, our family has a long history with visiting Disney Parks – Disney World in Florida in particular – and we took a week to go down there over New Years (a time I swore I’d never go!) a few weeks ago. While down there, I was reminded of one of the ‘little things’ that is imbedded in that company culture – namely, the two-finger point. There is actually a corporate rule at Disney parks that employees (‘cast members’ as they are called), are not allowed to point with one finger. So, given imagine the frequency with which these individuals are approached for directions by guests, you constantly see these employees pointing people in various directions with both their pointer finger and their middle finger joined as one.

There are a couple of popular theories as to why. Many suggest that it ties back the cultural notion of pointing at individuals being rude and that cast members might inadvertently offend another guest while pointing in their direction towards some other attraction or service. Others suggest that it is a nod to Walt Disney himself who, a smoker, was perpetually pointing with a cigarette clinched between those same two fingers. Regardless of the reason behind it, it is a noticeable practice of which I was reminded when we were down there, and then I came back to this passage from Isaiah that was in the lectionary for this week. “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;” God proclaims to Isaiah, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” In those words, I was reminded that sometimes pointing isn’t only rude, but it is simply not sufficient to meet the call.

Before we get there, however, let’s take a minute to look at John. The Gospel of John, like the Gospel of Mark, doesn’t have the birth story that we get in Matthew and Luke. John, instead, starts off with that more poetic delineation of the incarnation (‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...’), and then it moves right into the narrative of John the Baptist proclaiming that which is to come. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” John proclaims, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” And it is amidst those proclamations that we pick up John’s story in verse 29 of the first chapter:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’³¹ I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”³² And John

testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.”

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

There’s a fascinating dynamic, I think, to this prophecy from John. When you look at his words, you find a prophet proclaiming that something’s coming but all the while owning that he’s not quite sure exactly what that ‘something’ is. “I myself did not know him,” John says. “But I came baptizing that he might be revealed.” It’s subtle, to be sure, but I think it’s worth noting that there is a more invitational, and less exhortational, nature of John’s ministry here – at least in this moment. Even the next day, John is standing with a few of his followers as Jesus walks by and it’s almost as though he’s surprised as he exclaims, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ And, it’s in that moment that those two followers drop everything and follow Jesus. My point is that, when you look closely at the ministry of John, you see that he doesn’t always jump up in front of the crowds and start telling them everything they need to know about this Messiah who is on his way, but sometimes he stands among that crowd and shares that something’s going on as he invites them to join him as they discover that something together. And, that’s an entirely different thing.

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel;” God proclaims to Isaiah, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” As I read those words from Isaiah, thinking of his audience – that community of Israel that has been chased from their homes and run into exile by the neo-Babylonian Empire – I was so drawn into that imagery. ‘It’s not enough to raise up Israel,’ God says to Isaiah, ‘you need to be the light that draws in the world.’

There are a lot of types of light in this world. Some lights brighten the room as a whole so that all can see. There are lights that tell us where we shouldn’t go and there are others that tell where we should. I couldn’t help picturing that light on the porch, however, drawing moths to its brightness and letting visitors know of our welcome. I heard the voice of Tom Bodett ringing in my ears, “I’m Tom Bodett for Motel 6, and we’ll leave the light on for you.” Some lights are meant to draw the world in, and I simply wonder if we rise to that call often enough.

We live in a world in which people are constantly pointing in the direction of God. The symphony of our societal voices is filled with those proclaiming that we need to think this, believe that, and check off this list of to-do’s in order to be ‘right’ with God. And frankly, a great many of those voices point us in those directions while they scamper off another way. We don’t have to look long or hard to find those people wagging their fingers as they proclaim with mind-numbing certitude who God is, what faith is, how we must live our lives and what mantra we need to dutifully regurgitate in order to attain salvation. All the while, I am convinced that this world is clamoring for those porchlight prophets willing to exclaim that invitation as they

proclaim that there's something going on, we're not always sure what it is, but we'd love for you to join as we search for it together!

We don't talk enough about our covenant in the life of our church, and that's more on me than it is on anyone. But I found myself returning, as I considered these reflections this week, to the distinct nature of what it means to be a covenantal and not a creedal church. We don't have creeds that we proclaim as some uniform statement of belief to which we all subscribe. We don't have catechisms that delineate prescribed answers to theological question that represent the common perspective of Congregational theology. We have a covenant. We have profession that we own upon joining this church in which we make certain commitments to God, and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our covenant reads this way:

"I confess my love for God, for Jesus Christ, and for my fellow men and women. I hereby covenant to live in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in the ways of the Lord—known and to be made known to me—to share in the worship and work of the Church, to cooperate with it in all good enterprises, and to promote its service, its maintenance, its purity, and its peace."

Now, there's a lot in there that could be unpacked and if I'm entirely honest about it, I don't love that our covenant has more 'I' language than 'We' language. Still, the fundamental underlying principle shines through. *"I hereby covenant to live in the fellowship of the Gospel,"* that's us. That's our community of faith here in this place. *"To walk in the ways of the Lord."* To journey. To travel. Not to stay where I am but to be moved in that direction towards where God wants me to be. *"Known and to be made known."* Not proclaiming the certitude of what is, but to leaning into the mystery of what could be. *"To share in the worship and work of the church."* To be a part of the community as we engage upon this journey together. *"To cooperate in all good enterprises, and promote its service, its maintenance, its purity, and its peace."*

It's not hard to start hearing the voices of the lawyers and corporate officers of years past echoing in those final phrases, and I could certainly go on and go deeper into so many of these things, but when you begin to parse those words and grasp on to that covenant that exists in lieu of any creeds or catechisms in the life of our church, what you find is that we are being called to be porchlight prophets. We are being called to be invitational and to be invited into that journey of claiming the promise that something is going on, that we don't quite know what that something is, but that we want to walk together as we seek to understand it better.

We don't have to look long or hard to find those people wagging their fingers as they proclaim with mind-numbing certitude who God is, what faith is, how we are to live our lives, and what mantra we need to dutifully regurgitate in order to attain our salvation. All the while, I am convinced that this world is clamoring for those porchlight prophets willing to exclaim that invitation as they proclaim that there's something going on, we're not always sure what it is, but we'd love for you to join as we search for it together! And the covenant that binds us a church, and frankly every covenant of every Congregational Church of which I've been a part, tells us to do the latter! In a world filled with voices more than ready to proclaim their certainty and righteousness, the very Congregational Way of being a church calls out to the broken and

confused with a voice of invitation that leans into the mystery and claims the joy of exploring that mystery together.

Today, tomorrow, in all the days to come – as we head out into a broken, divided, hurting world clamoring for something – may we be that voice of John, that echo of Isaiah, never pointing at the direction that they should go, but always inviting them into the mystery, that we might look to discover that glorious ‘something’ together.