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Pastor Ellis White  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Instagram Jesus: Influencers*

### *Mark 1:2-3*

"On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people from across the country descended on the Mall in Washington, D.C., to hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. give his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. The organizers didn't send out 250,000 invitations and there was no Web site to check the date. How did they get a quarter of a million people to show up on the right day at the right time?"<sup>1</sup>

This weekend, as we head into our #InstagramJesus series, I want to talk to you about #influencers.

MLK was an influencer, who prepared the way for a revolution. Because of his dream of freedom, he drew a crowd of a quarter of a million on a hot summers day in August to that rally, and the world has remembered him ever since.

Today, drawing crowds doesn't have to happen in a physical space. Some of you may be familiar with Social Media Influencers but for those of you who aren't, let me explain. Social Media Influencers are simply people who influence other people through social media, like Instagram and YouTube.

Now these are people, most of us have never heard of. They don't appear on TV, they don't appear in newspapers, but they hold incredible influence over Millennials and Gen Z. Huda Kattan is one [SLIDE - photo]. She is an Iraqi-American makeup artist and beauty blogger. You've probably never heard of her. I hadn't. She has 31.5 million followers on Instagram. That's 31.5 million people who get updates from her every day.

Here's another: Lele Pons. She is a 22-year old Venezuelan who according to google is quote "an internet personality." 32.3 million people follow her—even more than Huda!

And it's not just women...Zach King is a 28-year-old from Portland who does magic videos. 21.4 million people follow his Instagram page.

Now, of course, the marketers have cottoned on to this, and so companies have begun sending their products to these influencers, realizing that just one positive post on Instagram about their product reaches 3 times more people than one TV commercial during primetime TV. Social Media influencers prepare the way for people to buy products. No wonder they don't have other jobs than posting on social media! And our young people know it. A recent survey found that more than 50% of kids ages 6-17 want to be a YouTube star, or a blogger/vlogger.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, to amass a large-scale following, you don't need to march on the National Mall, you just need to post a few videos from your bedroom!

Two weeks ago we heard from Pastor Mark about an influencer. He was a man named John. He lived 2000 years ago in modern-day Israel. We read that "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him." (Mark 1:5) For that day and age, this guy was an influencer. He had

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Sinek, "Start With Why," p. 126-7.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3617062/children-turn-backs-on-traditional-careers-in-favour-of-internet-fame-study-finds/>  
Sermon Notes

amassed a following. People were flocking to see him. But who was he? Who was this John who had appeared from nowhere and was leading a regional religious revival?

Today, I want to ask three questions.

## Who was John?

The religious leaders were asking the very same question. We're in Mark's gospel—his account of Jesus' life—but if we turn to the parallel passage in John's gospel, we read that the Jews sent priests and Levites (that's the religious leaders) from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" They want to know who on earth this young man is that is holding so much influence over their people. Exactly the same question I was asking when I started researching social media influencers—who on earth are these people? I've never heard of them!

And the truth is that our social media image of ourselves, is very rarely the true image. The people we see on social media, the images we see of our friends and their lives, and the images we post of our lives are not reality. Let me demonstrate.

I posted this image on Instagram the Sunday of thanksgiving weekend. So peaceful. You all probably think I took a lovely stroll on a Sunday afternoon with my son, and as we did he began to fall asleep gently to the movement of the stroller. I wish. The reason he was in the stroller asleep is because he had thrown a mega tantrum because he didn't want to go for a walk, screamed for 10 minutes at the top of his lungs while I got ready, before I finally picked him up, held him while he struggled, began to rock him as he put 120 decibels of pain into my ears, and then "bam" he was fast asleep. A very peaceful Sunday afternoon, Instagram-worthy walk ensued.

Social media isn't a portrayal of our true selves. Our public personas rarely are! And the religious leaders wanted to know who the real John was that everyone was coming out to see. So they asked him, "Who are you?" And people had been saying a lot of things about John. They had all been trying to guess who he was. You see there were three figures prophesied about in the Old Testament. Three people who would come to bring about revival. One was known as the Prophet—Moses spoke about him. Another was Elijah—remember he didn't die, he got caught up in chariots of fire—well there was a prophecy he would come back. And yet another was the Messiah, a.k.a. the Christ—the one who would come and rescue the people of God from oppression.

And really, John could have said he was any one of those three people and a lot of people would have believed him. His large scale religious revival was proof that he was someone special. And yet, when he was asked,

"Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.'" (John 1:20)

You know it can be really tempting to believe when we are successful that we are someone important. Really tempting to believe the public image of ourselves is the reality. We just had a great year as a church last year. We saw 200 more people every weekend in our weekend services in the second half of last year than the year before. We saw 67 professions of faith last year, which is more than for many, many years. And we finished paying off the first \$3M of our \$5M Beyond These Walls initiative to pay off our mortgage. It was an unbelievable year. And it can be really tempting to believe: "Wow! We must be something special. Aren't we awesome."

When things go well, it can be easy to believe the public image of ourselves is the true image. John could have believed he was the Christ, or the Prophet, or Elijah. He could have believed he was the one to bring about a rescue of God's people. But John knew who he really was. He wasn't any of those people. So the religious leaders asked him again, "Who are you?" and he said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" (John 1:23)

John knew who he truly was. He quoted from another prophecy. But not a prophecy about a big name personality like Elijah or the Christ. A prophecy about a voice. It's a prophecy that is quoted in all four gospels. In Mark, it's in 1:3, and this is where I want us to stay for the rest of our time.

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'  
(Mark 1:3)

John knew that his public image was not his true image. He knew he was simply a voice.

The original context of this verse is the OT book of prophecies from Isaiah. And if you've ever read Isaiah, you know that for 39 chapters it is pretty much all doom and gloom. There is a little spark of hope here and there, but mainly it is bad news for God's people, and the surrounding nations. And then, along comes chapter 40, like a breath of fresh air in a sweaty men's locker room. Suddenly, Isaiah begins to prophecy that the war is over. No longer is there a battle for your lives. God has forgiven your sins. And he is on his way to take you back to himself.

It's the good news that in spite of what we have done, in spite of the things left undone, in spite of the people we've become, that God is coming to bring us home to him. That he still loves us, that we are still his, and that he still wants us to be with him. And he is coming to rescue us, to redeem us, to revive us. And in this context, we read these words,

"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3)

John knew that in the midst of this grand and beautiful story of our rescue, he had a role to play. John knew his role was to be that voice. That voice crying out: "Prepare the way of the Lord." John knew he wasn't the rescuer. That he wasn't the Savior, even if other people wanted him to be. John knew what his role was: to be a voice, crying out, "Rescue is here! Prepare a landing strip! He's coming in hot!" John was a messenger, not the Messiah. He was a speaker, not the Savior. He was a voice, not the Victorious One.

And John's response leads to my second question question.

## 2. Who are you?

Just over a year ago my family and I got stuck in England because our US Visa got denied. While there I got to preach on this passage. And it really caused me to self-reflect. I realized that I had been acting like this whole visa denial thing was on me. That I had made a mistake that caused the denial, that I had to do all the work to get out of the situation that we were in, that I had to phone call and email my way to a solution, and work until past midnight trying to solve things. And it was exhausting. And then I realized, as I was preparing to preach on this passage: I'm acting like I'm the savior here. I'm acting like I'm the one who's going to rescue the situation here. I'm acting like I'm God's chosen person here. And I had to stop myself, and remind myself: God's the savior. God's the rescuer. God can snap his fingers and solve this problem.

That question is a challenge to all of us. Because many of us, in our unique ways, act like we are the Christ, the rescuer, the healer... that we are God chosen one in our situations. It's a challenge to parents who believe they can fix every spiritual problem their kids have. For husbands who feel like they can provide everything for their families. For wives who believe they can protect their kids from every bad thing. For single people who try to solve their loneliness by giving themselves away. For churches that think they can build God's kingdom with just the right strategy. For leaders who believe they can build their empire. This is a challenge to every single one of us who trusts ourselves more than we trust Jesus. Because the truth is, that just like John, you are not the Christ.

But here is the good news... There is a Christ. And he is far better and greater than we could ever have imagined. This Christ is God, and was in the beginning with God. All things were created in him and through him. He is before all things. And he became flesh and made his dwelling among us. He ushered in the reign of the kingdom of God on earth, breaking the power of the kingdom of darkness. He died a death on a cross to set us free from the power of sin. He rose again to new life to show that death had been defeated and that we too might have everlasting life. And he now reigns at the right hand of God the Father in heaven and will come again to bring justice and righteousness on this earth, and make all things new. His name is Jesus and he is the Christ.

And we must remember this! When we sense the darkness creeping in, when we sense the pressure beginning to come, when we sense the anxiety beginning to rise... remember: I am not the Christ. I don't have to fix this; I don't have to solve this; I don't have to be the savior. Because Jesus is. And he is ready and willing to bring light into the darkness, relief from the pressure and peace from anxiety at any moment. All you need do is prepare a way for him to come, invite him to invade and he will bring his light, his yoke and his peace into your life.

There are many of us here this weekend who need to hear message. We are not the Christ. We don't have to be the savior. We don't have to be the solution to the problems of our life, or our family, or our world. We are simply called, like John to prepare the way for Jesus to come in. He is the one who is going to do the saving, not us. We need only prepare them way.

But I believe there is more to this passage than just our own struggles with self-salvation. John's example is not only one we need to remember for our own lives, but it's one that affects our testimony about our faith to the world around us. Which is my third question for today.

### 3. Who are we?

Just like John, I believe, we too, as the community of God, are called to be a voice that cries out, "God's coming! Prepare the way!"

I get the privilege of leading our weekend services team here at Chapel Hill. And this verse has shaped the way I understand the role of our worship leaders in our worship services. You see, from the outside looking in, when you have someone who stands up on a platform, has lights pointing at them, has a full band behind them, and is given a microphone and then asked to perform a song, people might look at them and think: "They're up there acting like they are the star of the show." And that's exactly what the religious leaders thought about John.

The religious leaders thought John was putting himself up there as the star. People were flocking to see him. And he just kept drawing bigger and bigger crowds. From the outside it might have looked like John was

the star. But on the inside, John knew who he really was. He was just a voice, crying out, "God's coming! Get ready!"

Our worship leaders know that that is their calling too. I know them all, including myself. We don't have a desire to put the spotlight on ourselves. Every single one of us, has a desire to see people encounter the living God when they come on a weekend. We are not the star, Jesus is. Our role is to prepare the way for the arrival of the King.

So, when you next see me doing my Pentecostal two-step dance, as my sister has now termed it. I want you to know, I'm not up there trying to get you all to like me and give me applause. When one of our other worship leaders is up there killing it on a song, or Derek is up there shredding the guitar, we aren't doing it for applause. We are doing it because we believe that in the context we live in, with the gifts we have been given, this is how we have been called to prepare the way for God's arrival.

This week Derek Mullen, who we just brought on as a part time Music Director to lead our [Modern] Band, shared with me that he bumped into a man at Alpha. This man said to him, I started coming to Chapel Hill and reconnecting with God because of your guitar solo at GLOW. Let me say that again, this man is reconnecting with God because of a guitar solo. Our guitar solos, and our drum solos, and our loud music, whether of the band, or the pipe organ variety, are not there for your enjoyment, or your pleasure... these things are there to prepare the way for the Lord. Because we believe this is the method God has called us to use to prepare the way for his arrival. And God's using it!

A neighbor of ours, who has never gone to church before came to GLOW—the evening with flashing lights and guitar solos, and more Pentecostal two-step than your grandma's Pentecostal church. She loved it. And she came back to Alpha last week, with all the other moms from her bus stop, and with her husband to explore faith together. Her husband said, "This place is perfect for me. I've been exploring faith for a while and I've finally found a place to do it." They're coming back this week. And it's not too late for you to join them or to bring someone with you.

One last story... As you all know we changed things up at Christmas Eve this year, and most of you loved it, but some of you, and we're listening to you, strongly disliked it. But regardless of what you thought, I was personally blown away by showing up for our baptisms on Saturday Night a few weeks ago to find four grown adult men, who had shown up to get baptized. They had all come to Christmas Eve and through that service had been moved by the Holy Spirit to make a decision to follow Jesus and be baptized 10 days later! God is breaking in! And we are called to prepare the way. To make straight the paths for the Lord.

Now I recognize that preparing the way may look different in our worship services today than it has done in the past. Honestly, a year ago, I would have really struggled with the idea of a 6 minute electric guitar solo in a worship service, and yet here is God using it to break into someone's life. God is pushing me outside of my comfort zone, and I know that our worship services are pushing many of us outside of our comfort zone in different ways. Whether it's a change in leadership, or seating arrangements, or volume levels, or anything else, I know many of us are being challenged. But I believe God is using all of this to break in to people's lives here at Chapel Hill.

We are a community of people, who together, are preparing the way for God's arrival into the lives of those who don't know him. And you all get to be a part of that. Inviting, welcoming, serving, giving, praying, and expecting God to move in ways that will amaze us. God is calling us to prepare the way for his arrival, just like John did. And you get to be a part of God using your work for his purposes.

So I want to close with a time of prayer. [Invite to stand, and close eyes].

1. Those who connected with our 3rd question "Who are we?" For those of you who want to be used by God to prepare the way for him to come in the lives of others.
2. Those who connected with our 2nd question "Who are you?" For those who need to let go of being their own savior and allow God to come in their own life.

*"Thunder in the desert!  
"Prepare for GOD's arrival!  
Make the road straight and smooth,  
a highway fit for our God.  
Fill in the valleys,  
level off the hills,  
Smooth out the ruts,  
clear out the rocks.  
Then GOD's bright glory will shine  
and everyone will see it.  
Yes. Just as GOD has said.""*

*Isaiah 40:3-5 MSG*