

i ≠ him: I ≠ first

John 1:9-18

It is good to be back with you. Last Wednesday, 70 of us returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was my tenth time but every time I go, it is a new experience. There is so much to see that you cannot absorb it all. The Sea of Galilee, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem...it is an exhilarating and often overwhelming feast for the soul and the senses. You hardly know which way to look next or what you are looking at. **Which is why getting the right guide is essential.**

What you DON'T want is a diva guide. Diva guides are the ones who are so impressed with themselves that **their presentation** is the most important thing. I've had a diva guides in the past...but never more than once. Because they are more interested in you noticing THEM than they are in helping you notice the incredible sites you've come to visit. Which is why I've worked with the same guide for years. Jacob's talent is being able to point out the things we ought to notice and explain them so that they make sense. He doesn't NEED to be the center of attention; he realizes a guide's job is to point...and then disappear... so that the site can speak for itself.

When we come to the first chapter of John, it is like visiting a Holy site...and it can be overwhelming. John doesn't start with the Christmas story; with mangers and angels and shepherds. John takes us back to "the beginning"...to eternity past. **"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."** That's how he starts. He introduces us to the hero of his gospel in a unique way. In fact, for the first 16 verses, he doesn't even USE his name. He uses a codename: Logos. "Word" in Greek.

Logos was a philosophical term used to describe the creative power behind the universe; the cosmic glue that held everything together. But to our surprise, John tells us that Logos is not a thing; Logos is a person; the person he will later introduce as Jesus of Nazareth. But the claims he makes about Jesus...the soaring, majestic words about him... are almost too much to comprehend. You can hardly conceive of what you are looking at.

But that's okay, because in this same chapter, we have a guide. His name is John the Baptist. Every once in a while, John pops up in the passage. In fact, these appearances almost feel like interruptions...until you realize that John the Baptist is helping us understand how spectacular is the person we are looking at. Like a good guide. Only the gospel doesn't call John a "guide;" it calls him a witness. Six times in one chapter.

For months we've been talking about what it means for us to love our neighbors. How to know them, care for them, invite them in, ask for their help. We never do this with ulterior motives; we do it

because Jesus commands us to. But our **ULTIMATE** motive is that our love, care, kindness and hospitality **will be a witness to Jesus**; will point to the only one who can make sense of every human life.

So, for Advent, we are looking at what John the Baptist teaches about being a true witness for Jesus ...and not a diva. And frankly, it is a relief. It is hard work being a Christian diva! It means having all the answers, being the center of attention, impressing everyone with how spiritual we are. But John the Baptist...in these brief appearances... teaches us that the secret to being a great spiritual guide... is to point to Jesus and away from yourself.

Like last week. We have just read that the Word ...the Logos...was the "Light of Life." Then John pops up and says, "I am not the light. Jesus is the light!" In other words, I'm not the one with all the answers. I'm not the one who can bring clarity to your confusion. I am not the light. But Jesus is the light. **What a relief that is!** As Pastor Ellis taught us, all we need do is be a reflection of the light of Christ. We are the moon, not the sun. If we stay in his presence, we can't help but reflect his light into the lives of others. When we admit, "I am not the light," it relieves the pressure of having to have all the answers.

Now we come to John's second lesson. I am not first. Pay attention, it's quick. Tucked right behind one of the most incredible verses in the bible: John 1:14.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.")

OK...let's back up a bit. The first few verses of this chapter make incredible claims about this person called "Logos-The Word." We are told that the Word is God, that he is eternal...that he is the creator of all things. Those are almost incomprehensible claims! But now comes the punch line of this entire passage. Are you ready for it?

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. This is the Christmas story in one verse. The Logos...the eternal, divine, creator of the universe... put on human flesh and came calling. When we look upon his face, we are gazing upon the glory of God. In the Old Testament, God was so perfect...so awesome that people couldn't bear to look at him. In fact, if they did, they died. But when we look at this person... Jesus of Nazareth... we are looking into the very face of God...and living to tell about it!

So, while our minds are swirling with that, we have our second little John the Baptist interruption. John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

In order to appreciate what this cryptic comment means, we need to understand something about John the Baptist: **He was a religious rock star.** He was the first prophet to speak in 400 years. After

the prophet Malachi, God went silent. He clammed up. For 400 years God's people waited for ...longed for a word from the Lord. But God was silent. Maybe he was fed up with their disobedience. Fed up with their idolatry. But God just clammed up...until John the Baptist came along.

John was the first prophet to speak in 400 years. And the crowds flocked to him. You know the old saying, "Location, location, location?" Well, John must have missed the memo. Because he started preaching out in the middle of nowhere...and still the crowds came. They listened, they repented, they were baptized. Even religious leaders. Even Roman soldiers. Even John's cousin, Jesus of Nazareth! John protested...but Jesus insisted on being baptized by him. Jesus honored and validated the ministry of this guy. In fact, he would later John **as the "greatest man ever born of woman."** Think of that. Jesus said that of all the people who ever lived, John was the GOAT. The greatest of all time. Abraham? Moses? David? Nope...John the Baptist was the greatest.

But John knew there was someone greater. That's why he said that even though Jesus was born after him, he was before him. Ranked higher than him. In other words, John was saying, "Despite what you think of me, I'm not first; Jesus is first. I'm not preeminent; Jesus is preeminent. I'm not in charge; Jesus is in charge!" Later on, he reinforced this idea when he said this about Jesus: "He must increase but I must decrease."

If you want to be an effective witness for Jesus, you must learn to decrease; you must make less of yourself. Someone once described Christian discipleship as "Downward Mobility." And that is exactly against our instincts. We humans want to make MORE of ourselves. We want to be important; we want to be in charge; we want to be recognized. And John says, "Step back..."

Do you know what this speaks to? The Lordship of Jesus. The declaration that Jesus is preeminent over all. The earliest creed of the Christian Church was, "Jesus is Lord!" Not "Jesus is Savior;" but "Jesus is Lord!" He's in charge. He's in command. He is first. **I don't know how American Christianity came up with this idea, but we have developed the notion that the Lordship of Jesus is like graduate school.** You start with Jesus as Savior. And who wouldn't want that? Have Jesus take away all your sins, forgive you of everything bad you've done, make a way for you to go to heaven.

But Jesus as Lord? Well...we'll hold off on that one for a while. Until I've lived the life I want to live...until I've spent my money the way I want to spend it... until I've had all the kinds of relationships I want to have...I'll just put off that Lordship thing until then. That's what Constantine did. Even though this Roman emperor made Christianity the official religion in 323, Constantine wasn't baptized until his death bed. He didn't WANT Jesus to be emperor of his life; HE still wanted to be emperor of his life.

But it doesn't work that way. It never has. Only Jesus the Lord can be Jesus the Savior. They go together. Only when we declare that Jesus is first...Jesus is in charge...do we experience the salvation of Jesus. It's not "Jesus as savior" now...and someday, "Jesus as Lord." It's a package deal!

Perhaps the great delusion of my ministry life is the idea that I was in charge; that everything depended upon me. Over the years the Lord has beaten that delusion out of me. And may I tell you...when you finally come to realize that Jesus is in control, it is an incredible relief! When I was in charge in Israel it meant that anyone who was sick was my responsibility, anyone who was lost in the Old City was my responsibility, anyone held up in security in Frankfurt and about to miss their connecting flight was my responsibility. I'm telling you, when I land in Sea Tac, pick up my bags and get in the car to come home, it is a HUGE relief. Not to be in charge any more.

You want to be an effective witness for Jesus? Then remember your place! You are not first; Jesus is first. You are not in charge; Jesus is in charge. You are not Lord; Jesus is Lord. Can you say that about your own life? Jesus is the Boss; what he says, goes! That is what it means to be a Christian...and a witness for Jesus. Nothing less.

We are reminded of that when we come to this meal. Jesus said that he had a new covenant for his disciples. Only God can make a covenant! And when we receive this meal, it is a way for us to renew our own commitment to the preeminence...to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ.