

**Don't Look at Me!**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Christmas 2C  
*John 1:6–8, 19–28*

My mother would tell you, flat out, that her favorite Gospel was the Gospel of John. The other three were fine, mind you, but they didn't light a candle to John. Others might call it the Fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) Gospel, but it was #1 in Mom's book.

A lot of people agree. For years, counselors at Billy Graham Crusades would hand out copies of John's Gospel to everyone who came forward at the invitation. It's hard to match John's striking language and images, at once simple and profound, basic and advanced—as someone said: a wondrous pool of living water in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim without ever plumbing its vast depths.

It plunges right in, “In the beginning,” not with Jesus's birth, however—this Gospel has no traditional Christmas story—but with some bigger and better. It opens with a soaring poetic tribute to Jesus Christ, God's “only Son, who is close to the Father's heart”—the personified Word from God's mouth, through whom God created the world and in whom God became incarnate in the world, God dwelling among us *as* one of us.

Tightly entwining verbal and visual imagery, John's prologue conjoins God's dynamic Word with the inextinguishable Light of the world that generates and sustains all life. No other Gospel advances such a scintillating, majestic view of Christ.

Surprisingly, however, this stirring ode to Christ is interrupted in verses 6–8 by a more prosaic interlude about another “man sent from God, whose name was *John*” and a parenthetical insertion about this same man in verse 15.

This “John” was not the Gospel author, traditionally thought to be the apostle John, but rather John the Baptizer, who bore witness to the Messiah or Christ. The fact that the prologue mentions this John signals his importance, even as the awkwardness of his introduction implies an ambiguous status.

Ambiguity, however, soon gives way to clarity. Though being God's authorized witness to the light, John “himself was *not* the light,” not the “true light” of Christ (1:9), who sparks life, reveals the invisible God, and guides God's children in the way of truth. Further, John's testimony emphatically highlighted Christ's *preeminence above* him and *precedence before* him, as he “cried out, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”

Accentuating who John the Baptist was *not* and how he ranked in relation to Christ betrays a tension regarding his place in the Gospel tradition. Each Gospel negotiates John's relationship with Jesus in some way. While John was unquestionably influential and “great” in God's kingdom, as Jesus himself says in Matthew and Luke, he was by no means greater than

Jesus—and he knew it and vigorously touted Jesus’s primacy, certified by temporal priority as well as essential superiority.

As the Word-with-God at creation, Jesus existed in an exalted state *before* John (and everyone else), even though Jesus came into public view on earth *after* John’s preparatory witness.

Even so, the Fourth Gospel’s pattern of sharply distinguishing between opposing forces—like life/death, light/darkness, truth/falsehood—does not carry over to Jesus/John. Jesus’s manifestation as the “true light” and prophet of God does not make John a false prophet or denigrate his testimony about Jesus. Jesus later certifies that John’s “testimony to me is true.” But it does put John in his place, which he accepts.

Of course, when it comes to the world, the cosmos, the heavens and the earth fashioned and fueled by the triune God—Father-Son-Spirit, the creative Word, Light, Power, Energy—we all share a common place together, knit together in womb and world by our Loving Maker who continues to make and remake, form and re-form us—individually *and* together as a community.

We live and work and have our being *under* God’s life-sustaining umbrella, following *after* Christ’s way, truth and life *with* one another, loving one another as Christ has loved us. Such is the Spirit of Christ, the *Paraclete*, as this Gospel calls the Spirit—the one who comes beside and dwells within us to be the guiding presence of Christ every step of the way—if we will humbly follow the Light.

Unfortunately, the humble and humbling Spirit of Christ, is not the spirit of our age—which seems to be in a constant, manic quest for attention and power. The attention-craving child cries out, “Look, Mom, no hands!” (riding a bike), or “Dad, watch my cannonball into the pool.” These calls for attention are appropriate for a child developing her self-identity.

But sadly, many of us never grow up. Look at me, world! Vote for me! Love me! Adore me! Follow me! In our media-mad age, we’ve developed a new category of people known as *influencers*—those who promote themselves and their views via various social media platforms in order to garner more and more “likes” and “followers.” Wow—that little 60-second video I posted got 6 hundred “likes,” and I’m now up to 6 thousand or 6 million “followers”—depending on how “influential” you are.

I’ll grant you, some people are worth “following” because they have real wisdom, insight, and experience to offer. But most of those folks, interestingly, are not big self-promoters, not glitzy go-getters.

In case you’re wondering, by the way, I’m no great “influencer.” Over a 30-year academic career, I think I’ve influenced a few students, hopefully for the better. But I’m nobody’s guru. I do have a wonderful dog that “follows” me everywhere in the house. But I think he’s mostly hoping for treats. And when I’m out walking him and he *should* be following, he’s usually out front tugging at the leash, leading the way. “Dog walks man.”

Maybe I'm just too self-conscious or even jealous of today's successful "influencers" who boldly announce, "Here 'I am'. Look at me. Follow me. I'll show you the way." Maybe.

But what worries me even more than such narcissistic preening, as it strikes me, is the fact that so many people seem attracted to these "idols." In droves, they happily and blindly follow these Pied Pipers sporting their fancy togs and spinning their wispy tunes.

So many so desperate for light that they follow false lights, lesser lights, fizzling lights. The Gospel of John makes a strong case that only One Light, Jesus the Christ, is worth following, worth giving one's life to. Only Christ has the right to say: Look, here I AM. I AM the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, the Life—because I AM *one with God my Father*.

Back to John the Baptist. Again, the Gospel of John makes clear that *that John was not* the Light. But how did John respond when the spotlight was on him. He was a powerful preacher in his own right and had truly "influenced" many people, drawing them to repentance and baptism. He'd become something of a crowd favorite and had some dedicated disciples of his own.

So—when the reporters press in with their mics on and cameras rolling, what does John the Baptist have to say for himself?

In the first scene following the prologue, some Jewish religious "influencers" question John, wanting to know: Who are you? Why are you baptizing? What's your deal? Are you campaigning to be the Messiah yourself? Although we sense an accusatory edge in their interrogation, they have reasonable concerns. Who are you, Man?!

John answers clearly and candidly. First, he confesses, "I am not the Messiah." Pressed further about his affinity with other figures associated with God's coming kingdom—"Are you Elijah?" . . . "Are you *the* prophet we've been expecting?"—John again replies unequivocally, "I am not . . . No!" He could scarcely be more decisive: not the Messiah, not Elijah, or another big-time, end-time prophet. Not me!

John's dissociation from Elijah is particularly striking, since other Gospels happily correlate the Baptizer with the fiery prophet Elijah's anticipated role of preparing the way for the Messiah's advent. This Gospel, however, aims to erase any trace of overplaying John's reputation and underplaying his subordinate role to Jesus.

"I am not worthy to untie the strap of the sandal" of the true Messiah. That echoes what John the Baptist says about Jesus in the other Gospels. And his final words in this Gospel drive home the point even more: "He [Jesus Messiah] must increase, but I must decrease."

John the Baptist bears witness not to himself, but to Jesus as Messiah, Son of God, and Lord. He's the first among a team of other witnesses, including a water-drawing Samaritan woman, a healed blind man, and ultimately the Gospel writer himself.

Witnessing to Christ marks a primary role for model characters in the Fourth Gospel. *And note well*: this witnessing role involves much more than simply transmitting reliable information about Jesus. It also entails personal, progressing, firsthand experience of seeing and knowing Christ. True witness *to* Christ is grounded in living experience *of* Christ.

In response to the question concerning why he baptizes people, John says: “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom *you do not know*.” It seems that John hopes that people will emerge from the waters of baptism with a change of heart and mind, with a fresh readiness to meet and know God-in-the-flesh standing right in their midst!

The next day John sees Jesus coming and directs everyone’s attention to him: “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” He’s the one I’ve been talking about! He’s the one who will change the world and put the world to rights. *See* him! *Know* him!

But John also makes a surprising personal confession: “*I myself did not know him*; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” I didn’t get it at first either, John admits. It took me some time, but in the course of my baptizing ministry, trying to make a difference in people’s lives and call them closer to God, I began to see that God has come to us like never before in the person of Jesus Christ. He’s the true Light, the very Light of God. I began to discover that in Christ, we truly *see God* in action—speaking, acting, living among us.

In wrapping up today’s message, let me stage the scene a little differently. The reporters press John further: “Look, man. People listen to you. Whether you like it or not, you have a following, you are an influencer. And we’ve got a lot of problems in this country of ours. What should we do about them, John? People want to know!”

To which John responds: “Don’t look at me! I am not the answer. I cannot make it all better. But I can point us in the right direction, the right way to go—indeed, the One who embodies the very Way of God.”

Instead of butting heads with one another, blocking each other’s way, broadcasting “It’s Our Way or the Highway, Buddy!”—

- Let’s join *together* this New Year in pursuing the life-giving, light-shining way of Jesus the Christ.
- Let the Spirit of Christ be our Guiding Light *together*, reorienting the dark, dead-end spirit of our age.
- Let us rededicate ourselves *together* to see Christ more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly—*together!*—day by day. Amen.