

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 15, 2023

John 1:29-42

Signs are how we navigate life. They tell us where the bathrooms are, the gym, a street or business. They keep us safe- wrong way, no left turn, stop.

For signs to work, you need two things. The sign itself, and someone to see it.

The Gospel of John is a book of “signs”. Pastor Brian Stoffregen understands these “signs” to be things, events, people who point to something else. This theme and purpose for the gospel is stated in the 20th chapter where the author writes that there were many other signs Jesus did in the presence of his disciples, but that John has written these, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name.”

John the Baptist is one of those signs. What’s on the screen is a picture of Matthias Grünewald’s (ca. 1480–1528) Isenheim Altarpiece. If you look to the right of Jesus, you will find his image of John the Baptist. What do you notice? Let’s take a closer look. For me it is that even as your eye is drawn to John- that extraordinarily long finger of his points you back to Jesus on the cross. John is a sign pointing you to Jesus.

You can hear this in the gospel when John sees Jesus coming towards him and declares “Behold!” literally it means, “See! Look!” you can almost see his arm shoot out to point. A visual sign for people to look. Then we get a verbal sign pointing to Jesus and who he is, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin

of the world.” The next day Jesus walks by and John does the same thing, “Look, behold, see, here is the Lamb of God.”

John is the sign who physically and verbally points to Jesus, the Lamb of God, the one in whose name we might have life. But we need more than the sign, right? We also need someone to see the sign.

In this case, it is two of John’s disciples. They hear John say this about Jesus, they follow his finger to see who he is talking about, then they follow Jesus. They follow the sign. When they ask Jesus where he is staying, his response is “Come and see.”

After spending time with Jesus, then these disciples themselves become signs- Andrew going to his brother and points to Jesus, “We have found the Messiah!” and then he not only points to Jesus but acts like GPS and takes Simon to him.

Who or what was the sign that pointed you to Jesus? Was the GPS that got you to this place that is St. John or even just to the assembly that is the church?

For many, it was our parents. Who by their own actions and words pointed to Jesus as their Lord. The one in whom they found life fuller and more abundant. Who pointed us to Jesus by coming to worship, reading the Bible, praying. By doing these things not just on Sundays, but every day.

Perhaps it was a friend, who invited us to “come and see” when they went to a youth event, Vacation Bible School, or worship service. Over the years I have found that our youth have much to teach us about simply being inviting to others.

There are many who have been John the Baptist or Andrew for us, pointing us to the Lamb of God. And we are so thankful for them. Those who have pointed the way for us.

But I also have to ask, how have you been a sign in your life? Pointing others to the Lamb of God. To the one in whom we find life fuller and more abundant.

How well do we emulate John and speak openly, point clearly to Jesus when we see him walk by? To acknowledge openly our belief that this one is the Son of God. How are we bold like Andrew, coming to our family and friends and saying, “I have found the one we’ve been looking for! Come and see.”

Perhaps that is the better way to think about it. That we are not signs as much as billboards. Inviting others to “Come and see!” For the woman at the well later in the Gospel of John, this is her witness to others in her town, “Come and see.” Come and see a man who told me everything I have done, and who loved me anyway.

What could be easier? To just extend the invitation, come and see. Have you ever done that with something you were excited about, but just couldn’t fully describe? When someone asks for details, you just respond, “You have to see for yourself. Come and see”.

I had that reaction when Karen and I went to the House on the Rock in Illinois last summer. I could try and describe the eclectic, wonderful, overwhelming immensity of it all, but it would be easier to say, “come and see”. This slide is an example of what we saw. You really should go and see.

Jesus- the one to whom all of those signs pointed us to- is the one in whom we find life fuller and more abundant than life on our own. Who loves us without condition and who encourages and equips us to be all that God has created and gifted us to be. Jesus is the one who nudges us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He is the one who forgives always, but also reminds us that we can do so much better. Who paints a picture of the reign of God, where the oppressed go free, where there is justice for all, where love and respect for the image of God in one another is given without thought.

We honor tomorrow someone else who was a sign, pointing to Jesus, but also one who painted a picture of the reign of God here on earth and what that might look like in real time here in the United States. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. painted that dream of a nation where people were not judged by the color of their skin. Where those of different backgrounds, races, languages could live together in peace and harmony because they saw and accepted their shared humanity, the reality that they all bore the image of God.

Like so many of those who followed the call of Jesus to be signs, pointing to him and this Kingdom of God, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision was a beacon of hope for some, and created fear, anxiety, and hatred in others. Emotions that led to King's violent death, like so many of those other signs pointing to Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist, but also including at least eight of the apostles. Isn't it amazing how threatened people are by a world of justice, forgiveness, grace, and mercy? Mostly because they feel it threatens them, takes something from them in some way.

My friends in Christ, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Andrew, and all the other apostles we are both observers of the signs- being pointed always to Jesus, the Lamb of God, and we are the signs- pointing to Jesus and inviting others, “come and see.”

May we be diligent this new year in attending to those people, events, and things that point to Jesus- the Word found in the Bible, the waters of baptism, the Meal of Christ’s own Body and Blood, the assembly gathered around those gifts. May we also be so bold as to be that sign for others in our life and in our world.

Pointing always to Jesus and inviting others to come and see so that we all might be an even greater fulfillment of what we pray for each week, that the Kingdom of Heaven would come. Now, here, today.

And may we thank God always for those who have been signs to us, rejoicing that they have brought us into the presence of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Who frees us from all that oppresses us and reminds us that God does not come to condemn us, condemn the world, but to love it from death to life.

Thanks be to God!