

John 1:6-8, 19-28

**“Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord.**

**Grace & peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** There was just something compelling about John the Baptist. It probably wasn't the camels' hair wardrobe or his diet of locusts and wild honey. There was a commanding presence about him, something that made you stop and take notice. All of Judea flocked to hear this strangely-clad man, yearning to hear his message—the message we heard him speak last weekend: repentance and the forgiveness of sins, the Law and the Gospel. *John spoke with a rare authority, and the people determined that he couldn't have just been John, son of Zacharias.* He must have been something more. **“Are you the Christ?”** they asked. That would have made sense. This powerful man was no respecter of persons; he was the sort who even told soldiers what they ought to be doing. Oh, Israel had waited a long time for the Christ, the One who would vanquish their enemies and rule forever. Was John the long-awaited Messiah? **“No,”** he confessed openly. **“I am not the Christ.”** Strike one. **“What then? Are you Elijah?”** they prodded. Oh, for the return of Elijah, the prophet who spoke God's Word and brought famine to the land, spoke again and brought the rains. The man who raised the widow's son from death to life, who called down fire from heaven and stood up against 400 prophets of Baal. He was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, they remembered; perhaps he was making an encore appearance, disguised as John the Baptist. **“Are you Elijah?”** they asked. **“I am not,”** said John. Strike two. **“Are you the Prophet?”** others asked. The great prophet Moses had declared that God would send another one like him to preach to the people of Israel; and it was during the time of Moses that ten plagues afflicted Israel, the Red Sea parted, and manna fell from heaven. And looking at the results of John's preaching—we see that everybody was coming to hear. If John was the Prophet foretold by Moses, wow! He was just getting warmed up, so people thought they'd stick around to see the fireworks. **“Are you the Prophet?”** they asked. His answer was a simple **“No.”** Strike three. **“Who are you, then, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”** John replied, **“I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”** So that was it. John was the voice. For all of his authority and presence and charisma, he was just the preparer, the forerunner. And the voice was preparing the way for no one less than the LORD. John was not the Christ; but his message meant the Christ was coming.

And if the messenger was this powerful & compelling, what would the Christ be like? Surely He would stand out head and shoulders above the crowd. Wouldn't there be a handsomeness of power about him, a strength and authority that would be apparent to all? There would have to be: If the Christ was the One anointed by God in order to save His people, govern and lift them up forever, then He would have to be strong and powerful. Persuasive. A leader who stands out. John's presence meant that the Christ was coming, He was near. So people would know Him when they saw Him, wouldn't they?

Some sent by the Pharisees asked one more question: **“Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?”** John answered, **“I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose**

**sandal strap I am not worthy to loosen.”** Did they hear John? **“There stands One among you whom you do not know.”** Jesus was there! He was standing among them, the One so great that John wasn't worthy to loosen his sandal strap. **Jesus was there in the crowd; but they didn't know Him.** Strange, isn't it? You'd think that they'd recognize someone who was greater than John, Elijah and Moses. The One who flattens the hills and raises valleys. The One they call the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Being pretty good judges of character and all, you'd think they'd sense something. **But they didn't. They didn't recognize Him.** Because He had no special form or handsome qualities that made Him stand out; apparently, there was no beauty about Him that made Him attractive or desirable. He wouldn't have made it on the cover of People magazine as the sexiest man of year. He was just a face in the crowd. Shoot! **A Christ like that would mean you can't go by appearances. You'd have to watch what He does and listen to what He says, just to be sure.** But who was He? Who was the Face in the crowd? John's hearers didn't have to wait long—John would soon point his finger at the One coming toward him and cry out, **“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”**

And there He was—the Savior of the world who had been standing among them. **And yet, John just called the mighty Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . “the Lamb of God.”** *When one thinks in terms of mighty conquerors and kings, the image of a lamb usually doesn't come to mind.* Lambs don't go forth and fight and take care of others! Actually, unless they are taken care of, they wander around until they're attacked. Priests pick up lambs and sacrifice them, shedding the blood of these wooly victims all the time without resistance. **“Follow the Lamb!” is definitely NOT an inspiring battle cry.** Why is Jesus the LAMB of God? Isn't He strong and powerful? He is. He is strong—He's actually Almighty, All-powerful. But He's also meek, and Jesus was going to conquer His enemies by meekness. That very day, He did not declare Himself as superior to others on the banks of the Jordan; He submitted to Baptism, just like the rest of the people. **He was not going to save by overpowering, but by serving; He would not conscript followers and force them into His army, but would draw them to Himself by serving them.** Rather than punish His enemies until they dare not lift a finger, He would submit to their punishment and scorn. **Most of all, He would save by sacrifice—by offering Himself to God on the cross for the sins of the world. His blood would be shed, like those lambs on the altar; and His holy, precious blood would be enough to atone for the sins of all people.** THAT is why He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That is how He would fulfill all the prophecies God had made to His people throughout the Old Testament, the Savior who would come with a mighty hand—and yet be stricken, smitten and afflicted for our iniquity.

**But since the time of Adam & Eve, we haven't liked to go by the Word of God; we'd rather go by appearances.** Sin and its fruit has always been pleasant & attractive to our eyes, haven't they? And by our HUMAN way of thinking, Messiah ought to look like a powerful warrior. **He should have a palace and throne, not a manger and cross.** *Because people go by appearances, many would miss the Savior in the crowd whom John the Baptist pointed to that day.* And the same thing has been happening ever since. People pass Jesus off as nothing special or just reject Him intentionally. But others will hear His Word. & hearing His Word, they will believe. Despite appearances, they will look upon the Face in the crowd, or the One pierced on the cross, and say, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”**

John voiced those words because Jesus was fully, body-and-blood present then and there. He was humble and meek-hardly outstanding, but He was there to save. He was present to be baptized with sinners, to wash their sins off of them and onto Him; and He would carry that awful load to the cross and die with them there. Still today every time we receive the Lord's Supper, we sing John's words, don't we? "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us . . . grant us Thy peace." & we sing those words because Jesus is still present among us. The Son-of-God-become-flesh-to-have-mercy is HERE. He is just as fully, body-and-blood present with us as when He stood before John at the River Jordan. Although He has conquered sin and death and risen victorious from the grave, and although He sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty and rules all things, He still comes to us humbly serve us now. Because He is the Word made flesh, when the Word is here, Jesus is here. *He is present at the font, in those waters of Holy Baptism; there, when our sins were washed away, they were washed onto Him and He suffered for them at the cross.* He is here in bread and wine, giving us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. These are humble, common things—words and water, bread and wine. They are unremarkable elements that we can find in any supermarket. Of course, His appearance was pretty unremarkable on the banks of the Jordan; yet He was there. And we have His promise that He is just as here with us, by His Word and Sacraments.

Of course, therein lies the danger. *Plagued by that sinful nature, many will run to seek God where He cannot be found.* They will follow charismatic leaders who voice popular messages but ignore the Gospel; but Jesus is not there. They will set aside the Word of God and seek to find Jesus in their feelings or their mountaintop entertainment or convention or workshop experiences, claiming that this is the Holy Spirit's will; but Jesus never promises to be found there either. They will point to churches judged "successful" in worldly terms like growth in membership, number of programs or emotional appeal as the places where Jesus is really present; but IF the Word is not preached and the Sacraments are not administered as He gave them to us, then it is all for nothing.

As Christians, we walk by faith—not by sight. We believe in the Word, not appearances. Therefore, we rejoice in what Jesus promises: He is with us, fully present, where He promises to be: Word, Baptism and Communion. Such means may look humble and unremarkable, but it is here that the Lord utters the most miraculous & most important truth: We are forgiven for all of our sins. The Mighty Son of God, through whom all things were created, comes here to serve. He cloaks His eternal glory in these means of grace to minister to us. It doesn't look glorious, but IT IS!

And this, dear friends, explains much about our lives. *It is sometimes taught that, as Christians, we should expect an extraordinary life.* Miracles should be happening, glorious proofs of God's love for us. We should be enjoying prosperity, good health and recognition since we're Christians. Of course, the logic in thinking that way is that *if our lives seem routine and unremarkable, there must be something wrong with us.* But there isn't anything wrong at all! Because as the Lord works in unremarkable-looking ways for our salvation, so He works for ALL our Other needs as well. *Rather than heal us of diseases or injuries outright in a glorious display of power, He uses doctors and nurses to perform that work.* Rather than drop groceries out of heaven to our doorstep, He provides funds

through our employment or retirement income and gives us food through the stores. Such an ordinary life does NOT mean God's Absence; this is simply how He works, Behind the Scenes, to provide for us.

& just as the Lord Jesus stood unrecognized at the Jordan River, so we too, may live a life unrecognized by the world. *As He suffered temptation, trial and affliction; so will we—NOT because Jesus has abandoned us, but because we are His disciples.* Yet the wonderful truth is that we are the sheep of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And when He comes again, He will draw us to His right side and say, ***“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world.”*** Amen.