

## *Pointing*

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany - January 19, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). John 1:29-41

Whenever I imagine the gospel scenes that we just heard, John the Baptist is always pointing. The image of John pointing became so strong as I anticipated this message that I was surprised to read the actual text again and see that it says nothing about pointing.

I'm guessing that the picture in my mind's eye of John pointing is prompted by the countless artistic renderings of John over many centuries. In many artworks, John is baptizing Jesus. But nearly as often, John is pointing. In one prominent mosaic at the Hagia Sophia, in Constantinople (now Istanbul), John has been pointing since about the year 1261.

In many artworks through the centuries, John is pointing at the person of Jesus. Some of you may know the nearly life size 17th century painting by the Spaniard Murillo, in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In a second school of images, John is pointing generally heavenward. Most or all of us would instantly recognize Leonardo da Vinci's last painting, provocatively sensual, one of the most visited paintings at the Louvre.

In a third category of images, John is pointing to a lamb, not just any lamb, but *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. One example, also in the Louvre, would be Jean Clouet's 1520 portrait of King Francis I of France. The king chose to pose as John the Baptist, pointing at a lamb in his lap.

Many of the images of John in this last category include scrolls on which can be read some or all of a key and repeating verse from today's gospel: "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"

This may be a good place to be reminded that this is not, or should not primarily be, an art history lesson. Rather, it is, or should be, a sermon. The main reason it's worth noting how often John is pointing in paintings is because the gesture so deftly shows us his vocation. In all four gospels, the fundamental role of John, his place in the salvation story, his purpose for being, is to point to Jesus and to name Jesus as Messiah.



The gospel writer whom we call John – not to be confused with John the Baptist – introduces and treats John the Baptist in a way that is both consistent with and stands apart from the other three gospels. John the Baptist is intrinsic to the magisterial Prologue with which this gospel begins. We are only at verse six when we read: *“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”* And now here John is, only 21 verses later, doing exactly that. John points, or we can imagine him pointing, with the intentions of revelation, contemplation and invitation.



By the end of today’s story, we see the impact that John’s pointing has on one of his own disciples, Andrew. In the final verses, Andrew may also have been pointing, in that moment when he finds his brother Simon Peter and excitedly tells him, *“We have found the Messiah!”*

Later, Peter himself will become a spectacularly prodigious and effective pointer. His first big opportunity to point others to the crucified and risen Christ came on the Day of Pentecost. As the story goes, there were 3000 new believers that day.

Many of those 3000 converts also became pointers. Because of them others who believed in and followed Christ also became pointers. And many, many generations later, at some opportune moment, someone whose faith rang uniquely true to us unashamedly pointed us to Christ. And maybe we can include here the ones who pointed out the God-thing that we needed to hear and that no one else was able to say. Or maybe it was the saint who saw both our best potential and how we were squandering it; they urged us to *‘get to the point, for God’s sake.’*

How many faithful souls have kept me on the path of life, or brought me back to it, because they pointed to a hazard or folly ahead and said, *“You really don’t want to go there.”?* You may join me in being blessed by taking a moment today to name and give thanks for those who seem to have been the God-given pointers in our lives, those who seemed to have been uniquely assigned to us, to *‘testify to the light.’*

We Christians have traditionally had a distinctive word for this particular kind of pointing. We call it evangelism. It is because of today’s passage that Christians have universally called Andrew the first evangelist. I didn’t use these e-words before now because I wanted you to keep listening. We Episcopalians typically don’t think of ourselves as very enthusiastic or capable pointers-in-faith – evangelists. And yet we can’t fully contemplate John the Baptist and his witness without also wondering about the point of our own lives. And not only that, we may know what it’s like to be the one for whom the hour comes when we feel compelled to point.

Right now, we are all remembering our mothers. They repeatedly told us to never, ever point. And to be sure, pointing can be rude, shaming, untimely and destructive. Even so, pointing in the right place and time and with the right intention can sometimes be a means of revelation and salvation that may not otherwise take place. And some people we know and love are squandering their lives, chasing after and addicting themselves to fleeting delights that later will bring them nothing but misery. Some are hungry for God but don’t even know it. Some are rightfully disillusioned with the church. They don’t know that that the crucified and risen One is still here despite our best attempts to keep him down. Who will point the way for these souls, if not you, or me?

From today’s text and all of the gospels it’s absolutely clear to whom and to what John the Baptist’s life pointed. I wonder if, to others, it is as clear to what and to whom you and I are pointing. Amen.