***WHO IS THAT GUY?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

January 19, 2020

Text: John 1:19-42

One of my favorite movies from days gone by is *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford. It is the story of two outlaws who make a living robbing trains and banks out west in the early 1900s. In the later stages of the movie, Butch and Sundance find themselves on the run from a posse of sharpshooters chasing them on horseback. Again and again Butch and Sundance find their attempts at escape thwarted as the relentless riders keep coming. Nothing seems to deter or slow them down. As they watch the unknown riders keep coming, they wonder aloud with perplexed awe: “Who are those guys?” for they are unlike any posse that has pursued them before.

That line from the movie came to mind as I read this passage from John’s Gospel, for a variation of that same question is raised again and again: *Who is that guy?* It is first raised in the passage we read this morning as we are introduced to John the Baptist and then to Jesus. John introduces John who is known as the Baptist or *Baptizer* (*Baptist* is NOT his denominational affiliation) by simply saying, “There was a man sent from God…” Nothing is said about a camel’s hair coat, leather belt, or eating locusts and wild honey. Those details are left to Matthew and Mark to describe. Nothing is said of his kinship with Jesus; Luke alone sketches out the connection between John and his cousin that begins with John’s prenatal leap of joy in the presence of the unborn Christ child. John the gospel writer disregards those details. He is less interested in the person of John than he is in the role John plays in the coming of the messiah – so John says only: *There was a man sent from God*.

Typically those sent by God are angels or prophets with a divine purpose to fulfill. The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary to tell her she will bear the son of God. Another angel appears to Joseph and the wise men in their dreams. A whole angel choir appears to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. An angel is sent to free Paul from prison. And prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Zechariah are sent by God with messages from God for the people of God. John the Baptist is no angel and he denies that he is the prophet, but he is sent by God with a clear purpose:

to testify to the light that shines in the darkness,

to prepare the way for the true light coming into the world,

to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, “make straight the way of the Lord!”

From the very beginning, John the Baptizer’s role is clear to us, because John the gospel writer tells us who he is and why he is sent. But to the Jewish authorities it is not clear at all who he is or why he is baptizing in the wilderness, so they send a gaggle of priests and Levites to ask John: “Who are you?” They offer a few possibilities:

“Are you the messiah?” No

“Elijah?” No

“The prophet?” No.

“Then who are you?” they ask in exasperation.

“I am the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke,” says John. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Who is this guy? He is the one who comes to prepare the way for the Messiah of God. He is not the messiah or the second coming of Elijah or a prophet heralding the end times. He knows who he is not, and he knows who he is: the advance man for another who is to come, one who is much greater than John!

In his book *Open: Inside the Ropes at Bethpage Black* John Feinstein describes the details necessary to prepare for and stage the 2002 U.S. Open Golf Championship at a public golf course on Long Island, NY. In order to prepare for four days of championship play, a representative of the USGA was on site at Bethpage Black every day for two years preceding the event. Over three million dollars was spent to improve the course. Contracts were negotiated and work completed by private contractors and municipalities to provide for improvements to the course, parking, transportation, food, security, and housing for the players and spectators. When September 11 happened, a whole new set of security concerns came into play. The book is a fascinating insight into the preparation necessary to stage such an event.

The USGA had three million dollars and a cast of thousands to prepare for four days of golf. To prepare for the coming of the long-awaited messiah, the Son of God who would take away the sins of the world, God sent – John. Luke at least suggests John has the support of an angel chorus to announce Jesus’ birth. But in John’s Gospel he simply says: *there was a man sent from God*. How could one man prepare the way for the Lord?

John prepared the way by calling the people to repent and baptizing them as a sign of their repentance. The water symbolized the washing away of their sins, as it does for us. He was not the first to baptize – other religious figures had baptized with water as well, but his baptism as a sign of repentance was in preparation for the good news he proclaimed – the kingdom of God was near. The messiah was coming! For people living under Roman rule, people who had waited centuries for the messiah to arrive and usher in God’s kingdom, this was welcome news, news that was perhaps too good for many or most to believe.

John had not read the tea leaves or the stars; he had not studied the Scriptures to discern when the messiah would come. He was sent by God. Keep that in mind the next time you hear someone on TV or in the papers claim to read the signs of the times and predict the end of the world approaching. John didn’t know the messiah was coming because he had figured it out. He knew because he was *a man sent from God* with that good news. The word he proclaimed was not his own – it was a word from the Lord. He was just the messenger, preparing the way for the messiah!

We too are the messengers bearing God’s good news. We are not the messiah! We are not called to save the world, to bear its pain, or to be the rescuer for all others. None of us is called to bear the weight of the world on our shoulders. We are called to be LIKE Christ and to bear witness to him; but we are not called to BE Christ. As John Stendahl reminds us:

*We are not, any nor all of us, the Messiah. That position has already been filled. To let Jesus be our Christ, our anointed savior and rescuer, may still entail seeking to be engaged in his saving work and mission – of course it does – but it also commands us to humility, a letting go of our seducing desires either to rescue or be rescued by others. We already have a Messiah, and he ain’t us.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

John was pretty clear about that with the Jews from Jerusalem. He was sent not to be the light, but to testify to the light to come. Like John, you and I are called to testify to the light that shines in the darkness, to bear witness to the one sent by God as the light of the world and the messiah of God, to continue his ministry of caring for the down and out by welcoming the outcasts and living in love – not because we **are** the messiah, but because we **follow** the messiah!

Who then is this guy who is the messiah? He is Jesus, son of Mary and Son of God. John the Baptizer calls him the Lamb of God. Contrary to the other gospels, John suggests that he did not know that Jesus was the messiah until he saw the Spirit descend on him in the form of a dove at his baptism. It was only then that he recognized Jesus as the One for whom he had been preparing the way, the One who was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In that title, Lamb of God, John anticipates the sacrifice Jesus would offer for all of us, a sacrifice like that offered in the temple to atone for the sins of the people. The image is a sacrificial image, but it is also an image of innocence and humility, characteristic of the ministry of One who came not to be served but to serve, not to exact revenge but to love his enemies, not to condemn the world but to save it.

Yet John also calls this One who is Lamb of God, *Son o*f God. The title *Son of God* is not about biology but about authority, power, and presence. In him God is present among us. In the words of the gospel writer: “*The Word was with God and the Word was God…And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth*.” That is who he is – not just a good man, not just a renowned teacher, not just a moral example, not just a healer of ills, not just a rebel with a cause – but the powerful Son of God who humbly serves as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, which include the sins you and I commit day to day! That is the testimony of John the Baptizer and John the Gospel writer. It is the testimony of Andrew who, after meeting Jesus, told his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah!”

It is the testimony of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose life we remember this weekend. In an article he penned in 1958 he had this to say:

*Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something at the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ arose and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

That is who Jesus was for Martin Luther King, Jr. – the messiah and risen savior who embodies God’s truth and justice for all people. Today, we are the messengers called to share that good news, heralds of the Gospel, the ones called by God to answer the question that new generations continue to ask: *Who is that guy?* What then will you say, you who call yourself a disciple of Jesus? Tell them what John says: he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, he is the Messiah, he is the Son of God, he is the One who was crucified and risen. Or simply tell them this, if you can: “He is my savior – and your Savior!” Amen

1. John Stendahl, “Messianic Complex”, The Christian Century, November 20-December 3, 2002, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Current Crisis in Race Relations” in *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Markin Luther King, Jr*., James M. Washington ed., HarperSanFrancisco:1986, p.88 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)