



Becoming Who We Already Are

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
June 30, 2019, The Nativity of St. John the Baptist*

Today is the Feast day for the Nativity of St John the Baptist, who is the patron saint of this church. So it's the day we talk about him, and therefore also about who we are, where we come from, what our purpose is. Now you all know that I've only been with you, getting to know you, since this past October. But I've already seen that the people of St. John's love to hold the old and the new together. We love tradition and we love to innovate. We care about being on the forward edge of the way of Jesus, leaning into the future. St John's was one of the first Episcopal churches in Minnesota to embrace LGBTQ folks, and among the first to hire a female rector. You have been a church active in the recovery community and a church involved in international peace and justice issues. For the past five years at least, you've been talking about desiring deeper relationships with our neighbors and those we serve outside our doors, to become less about charity and more about walking together with our neighbors because our liberation is bound together. We are a strong and vibrant parish that values children and youth, in fact we are one of the few Episcopal parishes with a full time children and youth minister, Shane Sanders Marcus. We've been cultivating relationships with various folks on the North Side in Minneapolis for a long time—Circle of the Beloved, and the North Side Achievement Zone, and Liberty Church, and the Healing Space. We are one of the churches with the longest relationship with First Nations Kitchen in Little Earth.

So in many ways, we lean into the future. We want to be at the forward edge of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement. And in that sense we have exactly the right patron saint. John the Baptist was an eccentric man, a prophet who lived in the desert and ate grasshoppers and honey and wore camelskin for clothing. Today in our scripture we heard the story of his birth, his birth to parents who were well past the age of childbearing and who had been childless. From the beginning he was a miracle, new life coming out of that which was old and no longer generative. The purpose of John the Baptist was to prepare the people for the coming Messiah. He was born pointing to the future. Even his name was maverick, given to him by God and announced by his mother, not his father, even though the people around him wouldn't believe her until the father confirmed her words. His name, John, means God is gracious, God grants mercy and favor. The name John may even be linked to the ancient practice of the year of Jubilee, the year of God's favor, which was a massive amnesty when all debts were forgiven, slaves freed, no work was done, even the earth and the land was given rest.

John was born pointing toward the future, toward the coming Messiah, and toward the graciousness of God. And the way he did so was to insist that the religion of his day was bankrupt. He was a relentless prophetic truth-teller to the powers of his day, including the religious leaders of his day. But his answer to the bankruptcy of religious practice wasn't to abandon it. What he did instead was to baptize people, announcing the forgiveness of their sins. Have you ever wondered what the ritual of baptism was about when John performed it, before there was a Christian church with baptismal fonts? Baptism was the original rite for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. Yet John was baptizing Jews. What did that mean?

I think John was inviting people to finally become in reality who they already were in principle. He told the truth to power, and then he invited

the powers and the people to embrace their divine vocation, to become fully who they were already created to be. He didn't tell Jews to stop being Jews. He invited them to become themselves more fully. He announced forgiveness. He knew that his answer to the problems of his day was not the whole story – he was still pointing toward the future, toward Jesus – but he got people ready, by helping them realize that what they were doing was empty, that they needed their religion to be about something real, that they needed to live into what their religion was about in the first place.

In today's world there is so much desperate need for prophetic truth-telling. This past week, during the month of Pride, when we celebrate and affirm LGBTQ people and their beautiful God-created diversity, the Covenant denomination voted to eject First Covenant Church in Minneapolis out of membership, and to defrock its pastor, Dan Collison, because they violated Covenant policy by marrying LGBTQ folks. Later today a group of people from every walk of life will march from Nicollet and Lake to First Universalist Church in Uptown to protest against our government's separation of families at the border and through the Muslim ban and deportations. I personally will be at First Universalist Church. I just returned from ten days in the north woods, in the Boundary Waters and the North Shore and Superior National Forest, where I soaked in God's amazing creation and was reminded again about our need to care for the earth and all its creatures. When I started thinking about the various issues in our world going on in relationship to today's sermon, frankly I got overwhelmed. How do I even choose what truth to tell to what power? What is the truth?

But John's answer isn't to get overwhelmed, and it isn't to digress into endless righteous indignation and finger pointing and hatred. It's to invite us to become again who we already are. It's to point toward the future, the future made possible when people follow the incredibly powerful and creative nonviolent Way of Jesus in which we love our enemies and refuse

to do violence even to them, yet still continue to resist evil in ourselves and in systems in creative ways.

In 1996, a 19 year old young man named Danny Givens shot an off duty police officer named Art Blakey at an attempted robbery, and they exchanged fire. Both were rushed to the hospital, and from the hospital, Deputy Blakey asked if Danny was OK. During the trial, when Danny was on trial for a maximum sentence of 60 years in prison for the robbery and for shooting Art Blakey, Mr. Blakey testified that he thought Danny should be given a second chance. So the judge sentenced Danny to 12 years in prison. During his prison sentence Deputy Blakey checked on Danny's mother from time to time, and Danny became a Christian. When Danny got out of prison, Deputy Blakey was there to meet him. He gave him a hug and said "I'm proud of you, I love you, and I forgive you." This incredible act of true and holistic forgiveness changed Danny's life. Danny is now an ordained pastor who is a leader in the Christian movement for racial justice. He is active in the Black Lives Matter movement, and is living and modeling what a life of reconciliation looks like. He has created a praxis curriculum for congregations interested in working at the intersections of race, justice and faith, and continues to be motivated every day by the unexpected and overwhelming love of God he received from a human being, Art Blakey.¹

Danny Givens is doing something that is inherent in Christian faith: he is incarnating the gospel. What does that mean? It means that he is making the love of God real, in actual, practical terms that we can see and describe. Most of us don't take that word "gospel," which means "good news," far enough. Gospel means something unexpected, undeserved, that is desperately needed but never anticipated. It's Art Blakey loving the man

¹ See this story as told on Danny Givens' Facebook Page, on "Steve TV," June 25, 2019, at http://www.stevetv.com/clip/the-cop-that-befriended-the-man-that-shot-him?jwsourc=cl&fbclid=IwAR2XrzS6xx3IJ6JcswgQDDslrwhhJaew_bahX-sMoBOW8QdWP8b9dNdOUc

who shot him and tirelessly seeking his wellbeing. The gospel is like appealing to the bank for an extension on your mortgage that you're about to default on, hoping desperately you can get just a few months' reprieve, and winning the lottery instead. It's like hoping the latest anti-depressant can help you feel just well enough to get out of bed in the morning, and experiencing lasting joy instead. The Way of Jesus, the Way of Love, is about the radical future that becomes possible when we embrace the love of God enough to love our enemies while resisting evil through creative nonviolence. I think Art Blakey might have been able to forgive Danny Givens for shooting him because maybe he could see himself in Danny, in this 19 year old that was caught in violence but who was more than the worst he had done.

What does all this have to do with us, with St John's in 2019, on the Nativity of St John the Baptist? This is about us facing what is empty about our practice of religion, and becoming more fully who we already are as followers of Jesus' nonviolent way. This is about continuing to lean into the future, in the tradition of John the Baptist, by being grounded in the utter amnesty of God's forgiveness and love, which extends to all people, both victims and oppressors. This is about reclaiming the vocation of the Church to seek and serve Christ in all persons, even those who are committing the greatest violence. The world is full already of righteous indignation, on the left and on the right. What the Christian spiritual path offers is a way to break the chain of violence and hatred in which victims often become oppressors, by a radical commitment to love while still resisting evil.

This is made possible by the unfathomable love of God for us. In the scripture text for us, John's father Zechariah says "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free." The Greek word for "come to the people" means more than simple arrival. It means coming close enough to truly see the people, but seeing with the intent to

heal, seeing with the intent to offer help. God is saying, I see you, and I choose you, to each person that exists.

Imagine that God sees you as you actually are, in your fullness, in all of what is going on in your life now and all that ever has happened. Imagine God sees fully, both your goodness and your hurt, and also your failures and addictions and the choices you've made that are hurtful to yourself and others. Then imagine that God sees you with the intent of loving and liberating. That God is seeking to liberate you to become who you really are: made in God's image, with the divine vocation of healing connection with all that exists. When we have received that love, it can liberate us from being curved in on ourselves, and flipped outward, no longer ego-centered but God-centered, to live without fear in service to God's reign.