

“Jesus Whisperers”
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Third Sunday of Advent; December 13, 2020

Some people like to talk extremely loud. Can you think of someone like that, someone who thinks that to connect with other people, louder is better? Louder may make your heart beat faster and louder, but I don't think it's necessarily better.

It isn't just blowhard politicians or preachers who think that the best way to gain a follower is to shout at the top of their lungs. Fewer and fewer people, of course, will actually “speak” to anyone anymore. We connect via tweets, texts, Facebook and Instagram. Did you know that many of the “tweets” Americans send are recorded by the Library of Congress? You don't have to be an author to be in the national archives. I don't know about you, but I find that kind of depressing.



Future generations will be forced to slog through such deep and soulful communications like, “Which of these two shirts do you like better?” Or “Look what my dog threw up!” All

this compelling stuff alongside communications that changed legislation and caused social upheavals. It's made us sound pretty foolish.

Communication and connection isn't about spilling out every thought that enters the brain. Nor is it about simply to "think it and sink it." True communication and connection are about conveying filtered messages of truth, beauty, and goodness which uplift the lives and longings of people. Call me square, but I really miss that.

There are times that if you really want to get someone's attention, you have to whisper. Or use a special voice in a special place. Before Moses received a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke, he heard a small, scraggly piece of sagebrush softly burning in the wilderness. From that small voice and vision Moses received the words of God that would turn his life upside down and lead the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. That story is in the book of Exodus.

In another story Elijah the prophet's moment of most personal communication with God didn't come in the great winds and earthquakes that shook the lands but in the "still, small voice" that spoke to him after all that tumult. That story is in the first book of Kings.

Good stuff, those Bible stories. Wilderness whispers, not loud shout-outs, spoke the truths that changed paths for God’s people.

In the story we just heard from the gospel according to John,



another guy named John, who’s also referred to as “the Baptizer,” is described as the one who “came as evidence, to give evidence

about the light, so that everyone might believe through him.” The other gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — call attention to John as one who “announced” the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 3:1-2; Mark 1:4; Luke 3: 3). John’s gospel, however, emphasizes the Baptizer’s role as “giving evidence” — rather than as a loudspeaker. The physical attributes of John the Baptizer’s ministry are downplayed. His baptisms and the presence of crowds are minimized. What John the gospel writer emphasizes instead is that John the Baptizer’s primary role was to give evidence to the imminent presence and person of Jesus the Messiah.

Here we see John the Baptizer as a simple communicator. He’s not an activist or agitator. He’s a “witness” — if you will — a single

wilderness voice bringing a message of promise and possibility to the people of Israel, a people in desperate need of promise and possibility. John's voice is small — small and in the wilderness. And yet his voice resonates with a truth that all who truly hear it can recognize.

Because John the Baptizer isn't about grandstanding but about pointing to the coming Messiah, he baffles the priests and Levites sent by the Jerusalem authorities to inquire after his pedigree. Any "real" prophet would obviously blow his own horn. John didn't. His whole "profession of identity" to his inquisitors is a description of whom he isn't. He "is not" the Messiah. He "is not" Elijah. He "is not a new Mosaic-style prophet" as was promised in the book of Deuteronomy (18:15, 19).

Those sent by the Jerusalem establishment to determine John's identity got fidgety and testy. They demand to know as we all would, "Well, then, who *are* you? We've got to take some kind of answer back to the people who sent us. Who do you claim to be?"

Only then does John name himself with words from the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying out to the wilderness" (40:3).

John's "evidence" isn't a personage, a special persona, or even a "brand." His evidence comes as a clear singular "voice" wailing in the wilderness and announcing the unfolding, unveiling presence of the one, true God. John the Baptizer is never the subject or even object of focus. Let every preacher — megachurch or otherwise — take note. John the Baptizer's witness focuses entirely on the One who is to come and the meaning of that One to the people of God. John the Baptizer didn't come to blow his own horn and announce himself. John the Baptizer came to point to "the true light, which gives light to every human being..." That true light "is coming into into the world." John the Baptizer claims no special identity of his own. His mission is to open up the hearts and minds of Israel to receive the presence of the One who is to come.

John the Baptizer knows his audience. He knows the hopes and fears of Israel's people. He speaks to them in a language they can understand, using terms and props that make sense to them by speaking to their needs. John the Baptizer is a "Messiah-whisperer."

A number of years ago Robert Redford directed and starred in a small budget movie that became an unexpected blockbuster. It was called *The Horse*

Whisperer. The story is loosely based upon the



life work of a man named Dan “Buck” Brannaman, a real life cowboy with an uncanny ability to calm frightened, panicked, and traumatized horses. All it took was the demeanor of his presence. Brannaman’s gentle demeanor, his intimate knowledge of how horses think and respond, made it possible for him to take “crazy” horses and transform them into calm, mannered members of a family. He did all this without yelling and using force.

I would recommend that you go back to watch this film. What the movie doesn’t reveal is that Buck Brannaman was a severely abused child, a boy so beaten-up that he was removed from his family and put into foster care. Brannaman knew all about bad, wounded behavior. He knew all about how creatures — four-legged and even two-legged — respond in the face of fear, and pain, and chaos. Buck Brannaman lived and worked with horses every day. He knew how they thought, how they

reacted, how they responded. He used that knowledge to “communicate” with wounded creatures.

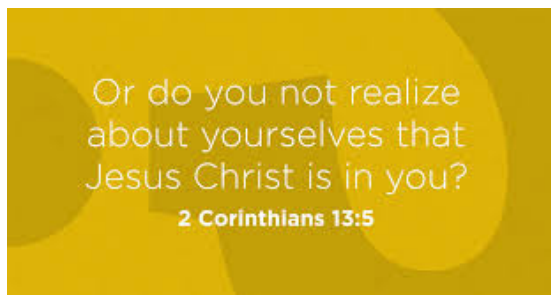
John the Baptizer wasn't a “horse whisperer” — though I have a feeling he could have done that well. John the Baptizer was a “messiah whisperer.” He proclaimed the coming of the Messiah by not proclaiming himself. He fully embraced his role as the one who was in the wilderness to extend a voice to “crazy horses” — the people of God who were lost, lonely, seeking solace and solidity anywhere they could find it. Can you hear John's yearning voice when he finally confesses that he's simply a “voice calling in the desert?”

John the Baptizer is calling, calling, calling now for us to join in the continuation of his proclamation. During this season of Advent, we the church are called upon to rededicate ourselves to being year-round, year-long, always on-call, “Jesus whisperers.”

A “horse whisperer” understands the creatures they are in relation with. A “horse whisperer” knows first-hand the fears, the hurts, the stresses, the painful messages so well that they can present a calm and clear alternative to those who are troubled and harassed. As incarnators

of Jesus the Messiah, we the church need to have this high degree of empathy ready to be given for our fellow human beings in this world. Flesh and blood people who are in pain because of their past and present.

Incarnators are the Jesus whisperers, and Jesus whisperers call out



the Jesus already present in people whether they know or not that Jesus is already present. Jesus whisperers point to the Jesus who exists in every

person, no matter how damaged or how wounded. Jesus whisperers gently enter into the silos that people imprison themselves in: silos of fear, hatred, mistrust, abuse, hurt. No matter what anybody has ever gone through, there's still a spark of Jesus in each and every person that wants to come out. A Jesus whisperer will name and nudge that presence, and call it forth: "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Twenty-five years ago I first read these words by a Jesus whisperer named Joel Goldsmith, and hearing them again and again, they still quicken my heart:

“Love is what binds us together. And what is love? Love is the ability of the Christ in me to speak to the Christ in you. Love is the ability of the Christ in me to recognize and bear witness to the Christ in you. Love is the ability to know that God is just as much your life as He is my life. Love is the ability to recognize that God’s grace is bestowed upon you as well as upon me. Every truth that I know about me is the truth I know about you, and that is how I love you — by knowing God’s truth about you. You feel it; you respond to it” (*Gift of Love*, pp. 46-7, (HarperCollins Publishers, 1975).

These are words of Advent. During Advent we are reminded of what we are to be doing (pandemic or not) all year long. We are followers of Jesus the Messiah, disciples of Jesus the Messiah, learners of Jesus the Messiah. We are incarnators of Jesus the Messiah. We are Jesus whisperers. May the Spirit of the Living God make it so.

Amen.