

I remember one of the few times I ever had a religious conversation with family friend who'd been in the Barnum & Bailey circus. It sounds odd to say that - I guess not many of you can claim that you have friends who were in the circus! I can't tell you how we ended up talking about John the Baptist, but we did - and when I described what John the Baptist did in John's gospel that made him important, "wow that's like my job!" You need to know that Kandee was an Elephant Rider, so what she said rather stopped me short. I wondered what aloud how she saw that connection and she said "well, my main job is to display the elephants." So I asked how one display's elephants, and with a grand gesture she said, "like this" and swept both arms to one side as if pointing an some imaginary beast ten feet high!

No, John's job wasn't to display elephants - not literally, at least. But it was as someone who pointed to another, who "displayed" Jesus. Today's gospel passage is full of words about John but they all end up describing his actions in one simple way: John the Baptist points to Jesus.

And this gospel passage is also one of "those" gospels, isn't it?! So different than what we heard last week from Mark.

John's language is at once mystical and yet, in some quite mysterious way, it resonates inside us. It's not a passage to say "well of course, the theological point here is 'this,' or 'that,' - it's a passage to feel rather than to think about.

Somehow the language of light in darkness, of presence but not of recognition communicates on a level that's immediately articulate yet beyond words - it's as if the surface is porous, a 'gateway' to something that we might not grasp but that, instead, grasps us.

For those of you who, like me, grew up in an Episcopal Church that had a "Midnight Mass" that really did span the witching hour, you'll recognize that the first part of today's reading is also the second part of Christmas Eve's late reading. It jolts, but in a good way - not the shock of of that sudden, loud noise that spikes your adrenalin, but rather the happy spurt of joy you feel when you see an old friend you'd be told was at death's door walk hale and hearty into the room and thus back into that empty spot where loss promised but mercifully didn't deliver.

The words jolt with joy. The language invites. Here's a one who proclaims Jesus simply by humbly suggesting "he must increase, and I must decrease" - God before ego. Openness to that grace and truth that is the Father's glory.

The gospel text tells us more about who John wasn't than about who he was, as if to invite our replication of that self-emptying prayer: he wasn't the light; he wasn't the Messiah; he wasn't Elijah; he wasn't the prophet. - "he must increase, I must decrease."

Yes, John's pointing is an open and welcome invitation to come in from the cold, to cross the hearth of faith and stand in front of the blazing fire of God's glory.

In a sense – in a profound sense – we’re called to be like that vision of John the Baptist: “he must increase, I must decrease.” We’re to point to Jesus; but that pointing has to have a certain permeable quality to it. A porous welcome – not for us the brash, street corner vocalizations, but rather the gentle invitation we issue by who we are; the invitation that says, “there’s more; much, much more – come and see.”

Be that doorway this third week of preparation, point to Jesus. Who knows, the joyful jolt might just be your own surprise of recognition at the one you thought you knew but now realize is so much more than you ever imagined.                   Amen.