

OPENING:

What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?

They both like honey.

What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?

They both don't wear any pants.

What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common?

They both have the same middle name.

I love that joke. You might like it, or you might think it is trivial. You might think it is the cleverest way to open a sermon, or the worst. Your mind might be wandering away, thinking about Christopher Robin, Owl and Eeyore, or you might be thinking "I wonder where this is going to go next."

Everyone has their own opinion on sermon-giving, on preaching. That's the way it should be. What is good for the gander, is sometimes not good for the goose.

Everyone has their favorite style, their favorite type of preaching.

FAVORITE:

Everyone then has their favorite preacher.

A lot of times it might be someone from one's youth, or from a time that your faith was being challenged, tested, or formed in a dramatic way. Then you point back and remember:

"That was a preacher that I really liked."

"That person brought the Gospel close to my heart."

Or your favorite preacher might come from history, maybe Martin Luther King, Jr. or maybe his namesake Martin Luther.

George Whitfield, the famous 18th century preacher of the Great Awakening, was supposedly such an amazing preacher that he could spellbind audiences with the elocution of a single word: "Mesopotamia" and all would swoon....

The Episcopal Church, of course, is headed by fantastic preacher at this very moment, the Most Reverend Michael Curry, good enough for a prince and princess!

Everyone has their favorite preacher.

JOHN the BAPTIST:

Who was Jesus' favorite preacher?

It was John the Baptist, the main figure in our Gospel reading today.¹

What do John the Baptist and Jesus have in common? A lot!

They are often confused for one another in the New Testament, Herod confuses them, early Christians will confuse them.

What do John the Baptist and Jesus have in common?

They were both were about the same age, cousins in fact.

What do John the Baptist and Jesus have in common?

Their preaching is what eventually would get them killed.

We know the esteem that Jesus holds for John because Jesus decides to begin his public ministry by being baptized by his Cousin John

We know that John is a great preacher because, as we read in our Gospel today, John is able to call the crowds all sort of things under the sun, yet there they continue to flock to him.

The fact that the crowd asks John the Baptist 3 times what to do and he gives them all tough marching orders, yet they stayed, that's a sign of a good preacher, I suppose.

PROBLEM:

Imagine the courage that John possessed to call those out who were in front, those who flocked to him, and how he was able to push them, castigate them, towards repentance, towards *metanoia*, towards a greater life of Faith.

It would be easier to rest in the bosom of Abraham, to rest in God's abiding grace. But John the Baptist called them out then, and calls us out today, to acknowledge the injustice of our society, to take action against the social inequality around us. John the Baptist calls out the modern-day preacher to ask their congregation what they are doing in terms of preparing for the Christ child in our midst.

Rarely does a preacher want to do that.

It would be like if the late Reverend Billy Graham, himself an inspiring preacher, after he had made the altar call in the stadium and the thousands were making their triumphant way towards him, he had decided to chastise them and then turn them around.

¹ Fred Craddock. "Have You Ever Heard John Preach?" Long, Thomas G., and Cornelius Plantinga. 1994. *'A Chorus of Witnesses': Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 35.

Everyone has their favorite preacher.

And John the Baptist was a good one for Jesus to choose.

DIFFERENCE:

The two men were very different, of course.

Let's take their diet, for one thing. John the Baptist preferred to dine alone, on bugs and honey. Jesus of Nazareth would eat with anyone—tax-collectors and prostitutes—and did not seem to mind a good party.

And, in terms of their preaching style, Jesus' good news sounds a lot more like... "good news." John the Baptist was more fire and brimstone. Jesus, meanwhile, could work in many different styles, but he could also let it rip every now and then.

Everyone has their favorite preacher.

It's interesting that when John stops his preaching, that is when Jesus starts his.

And when Jesus stops his preaching that is when we start ours.

The disciple Peter will deliver the Church's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost.

It's pretty good, in the Book of Acts, but not quite Jesus'.

Paul picks it up also, as do the rest of the disciples.

It's tempting to say: "It's been downhill, ever since" but then we remember those incredible preachers from our lives.

As your Advent devotional today, you might share with your family and friends what the best sermon that you have ever heard would be, *who your favorite preacher is.*

POINTING:

But, of course, the Preacher's job/intention is not really to give good sermons, for their own sake. It's not to demonstrate one's own skill or excellence.

In sermon-giving class, we were told when the illustration overwhelms the point, so that the listeners are so inspired by the finger rather than that what you are pointing out, you are in trouble.....

There was once a preacher, earlier on at his tenure at a certain church, who gave a dynamic sermon where he tried on lots of hats.... For years people would compliment him on that sermon. The only problem was that pretty soon neither the parishioners nor the preacher could remember what the point of trying on all the hats was.

The preacher's job, of course is to point to Christ, to somehow say "don't look at me.

Instead, "look at God's abiding love breaking through in the world. Can you see it?"

Usually it's a failure but maybe a glimpse, every once in a while, *through a glass darkly*, one does, or maybe you can't see it but you can see it reflected in the preacher, somehow.

CONCLUSION

Everyone has a favorite preacher and John the Baptist was many people's. He understood the above point and he was humble enough, in not thinking and accepting the crowd's judgement that he was the ONE. He was also not timid. He told the truth here, again he told the truth to the powers that be, and it cost him his life.

I pray that we all have John the Baptist's courage and humility in this Advent season, the courage to focus on that message, no matter how difficult, and see examples of Christ appearing in our midst.

I pray that we all have the courage to proclaim, in these difficult times, that message, the coming of Christ, regardless of the cost.

Everyone has a favorite preacher.

One of my favorites is Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message* and a host of other books, Peterson recently died and, in the remembrances after his passing, it was revealed that his son once told him that "Dad, you have been fooling people for years.... You actually only have one sermon that you preach, over and over again."

His son revealed that his dad's 'one message,' was something that Peterson repeated to him night after night as his son was going to bed.

That message echoes the preaching of John the Baptist and is a fitting Message for this Advent season.

Peterson called out to his son.

"God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless."

A voice crying in the wilderness:

"God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless."

AMEN