

Text: John 1:6-8;19-28

Title: *A Role for the Greatest*

The story is told of Muhammad Ali and a flight attendant. The flight attendant said to him, “Buckle your seat belt, Mr. Ali.”

Ali replied, “I am the greatest. Superman don’t need no seat belt.”

Not to be outdone, the flight attendant said, “Superman also doesn’t need an airplane. Buckle your seat belt.”

Muhammad Ali was always flamboyant and loud and his mantra was, “I am the greatest!” I’m sure it was all part of his shtick and his public persona. I guess if your going to climb into the ring with Joe Frazier or George Foreman, you have to convince yourself that you really are the greatest.

I wonder if Ali would regard himself as the greatest boxer of all time or as the greatest person of all time. If he wanted to contend that he was the greatest person of all-time, he would have to take on John the Baptist first, though.

I always find it encouraging that when John was at his lowest, Jesus called him the greatest who ever lived. John was never afraid to speak truth to power and he got in trouble when he told the king that he ought not be having an affair with his brother’s wife. The king didn’t like that one little bit so he threw John in prison. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the coming one or should I look for someone else?”

Jesus didn’t answer his question. Not directly at least. He just pointed to those things that were happening in his ministry that were foretold of the Messiah that enabled Jesus to say, “Yup. I’m him,” without really coming right out and saying it.

Jesus said this man isn’t a reed swaying in the wind. He’s not some prima donna in pretty clothes. Of all the people born of women, there’s none any greater than John the Baptist.

John’s prologues is unlike any of the other gospels. That’s why we put the gospel of John in a different category from what we call the Synoptics – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He begins with a theological treatise about the Word – the *Logos*. This logos existed in the very beginning with God and appeared in human history. This logos was the one who would give life and light to all men (and women). This logos is the light that shines in the darkness, pointing the way to a true and an authentic relationship with God.

John appeared as such a larger-than-life figure that it was necessary to state explicitly that he was not the Messiah. John came as a man who was sent from God. He came as a witness. There are a couple of things that are significant about that word witness.

One is simply to look at a modern-day English dictionary definition of the word. Merriam-Webster has two definitions that are helpful here. One, “one who has personal knowledge of something.” The other is, “Something serving as evidence or proof.”

Many of you probably know this already as well, but it bears mentioning that the root word of witness in Greek is the same as

the word from which we get the word martyr.

There are biblical mentions of the word witness as well. It has to do with giving testimony. Basically, telling what you've seen and experienced. One of the reasons that John was so great was that he understood his role and was so faithful to it. He was getting the attention. He was getting the accolades. For someone who is used to being in the public eye and accustomed to drawing a crowd, that's a hard thing to give up. He kept a laser-like focus on his job. Pointing the way to Jesus and being a witness to him – telling people that one greater than himself, the thongs of whose sandals, he said, "I am not worthy to untie."

He had a simple message. I am not the light, but the light is coming. John tells us in verse 5, "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." The world was such a spiritually dark place. There had been about 400 years between the time of Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet and the last book in the Old Testament and the coming of John the Baptist. His birth was so significant that Luke tells the story of angels appearing to his mother Elizabeth.

As I was preparing this, I was struck by the thought that light would need a witness. When you walk into a dark room and someone turns on the light, do you ask, "What was that?" Have you ever gone down in some caverns someplace and taken the guided tour and had the guide turn off the lights to show you just how dark it really gets down in the caves without any light shining at all? It's welcome relief when the lights come back on and you don't need anyone to tell you that the lights have been turned on.

There were some folks who were just blind. They were spiritually unperceptive and unable to see anything at all that was happening in their day and time. Other folks who were more spiritually perceptive were able to see that God was doing something. Like the first breaking of light before the dawn, they could sense something and since John was making such an impact, they couldn't help but wonder if maybe he was the light that was appearing.

The great African-American preacher Gardner Taylor preached for many, many years at the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, NY. He told the story of how as a young preacher in Louisiana, he was preaching an evening service in a revival meeting and the lights went out. He wasn't sure what to do and great black church fashion, a revered older man in the back shouted out, "Keep preaching. We can still see Jesus in the dark."

That's encouraging, but there's a real sense in which when Jesus shows up, there is no more darkness. John says, "I'm just here to let you know that light is coming. Light is appearing. It's dark now and there's just a little bit of light beginning to appear.

It's interesting to point out that John is not the main point of this story, Jesus is. John the Apostle writes, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made

his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John the Baptizer says about Jesus in verse 15, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” Later on in John’s gospel, John the Baptizer had people coming to him who were concerned that this other guy, Jesus was beginning to draw bigger crowds than the Baptizer was. John writes about it in chapter 3. He says, “²⁶ They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.’” ²⁷ To this John replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’” ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

The All-Joes team in the NFL has a unique motto. They say, “If you work hard, good things will happen – to someone else.”

So goes the motto of the All-Joes Team. Each year USA Today honors overlooked and often unappreciated football players by naming them to what the newspaper calls its All-Joes Team. Now in almost its twentieth year, the All-Joes award celebrates men who sacrifice their egos for the good of their team.

For all their hard work, these grunts receive little glory. "You have to know your role," says William Henderson, who used to play fullback for Green Bay's Ahman Green. "I'm there to create a cavity for Ahman to get through and to protect the quarterback from bodily harm." Guess who gets the accolades when Green runs for 1000 yards? "People don't respect the position," says Henderson.

One other star running back said about his blocking back who made the All-Joes team, "Mack does all the dirty work in the run game. He does everything. I mean, if the goal posts fell, I wouldn't be surprised to see him go over there and hold them up."

As a result of being named to the All-Joe team, some players have gone on to further glory. Previous All-Joes have made it to the Pro Bowl. We as Christians need to work for someone else's glory too. Our role is to diminish so that Jesus may increase. If we make this our goal, Jesus will make sure our efforts won't go unnoticed.

John the Apostle is writing about Jesus Christ. John the Baptizer is only significant as his life is related to Jesus Christ. About Jesus, John the Apostle says, “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.”

John the Baptizer is of interest to us because of his role in God’s plan to reveal the Son to the World. When John gets noticed, so much so that people go out from the city of Jerusalem to beyond the Jordan River to hear him preach and to partake in his baptism,

the religious authorities of the day will decide that they have to investigate this phenomenon. Notice, the picture is of the big shots in Jerusalem sending someone else to conduct their investigation. They sent priests and Levites to go ask him who he is and to bring back a report. There are three primary reasons why they would feel like they had to investigate. They were the guardians of the faith. They needed to have some answers to give to their people about what to believe and not to believe. Deuteronomy talks in two places about making sure that someone who is presenting himself to be a prophet really does have the right prophetic credentials – namely, their prophecies come true.

Secondly, they wanted to see if he really was a prophet. There may have been idle curiosity about him. Some desire to see what's all the fuss about.

Thirdly, it's like people from one church going to another church that's really growing in order to see what it is that they're doing right and learn from them and to get a feel for their ministry. There may also be some jealousy involved. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were roundly criticized by John and by Jesus for their lifeless adherence to ritual, their oppression of the people. Placing heavy burdens on them and then not lifting a finger to help them carry them.

When the big shots, or their representatives come out to investigate John, he could have gotten puffed up about that. He could have said, "Well, I never really thought about it, but I may just be the Messiah." He could have milked it for all it was worth and drained every last bit of attention that he could, but that wasn't John. He was singularly focused on proclaiming the message that had been given to him.

He was more like Elijah than anyone else anyone had ever seen before. Someone larger-than-life like John who had such impact must have been a prophet. When the religious folks demanded something to take back to their bosses, John simply said, "I'm a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" We talk about Advent as a time of preparation. A time of contemplating what it would be really like for Jesus Christ to be alive and real in your life. Maybe the best way to get a handle on this is to ask yourself, "If I knew Jesus were coming to spend a week at my house as my houseguest, what would I do?"

I would clean and dust. I would go grocery shopping, I would get rid of anything in my house that I would be embarrassed if he found. Some preachers used to tell us, though we don't so much any more, "Don't be anywhere you wouldn't want to be when the Lord comes back." It's like preparation for a royal visit in the ancient world and even in our contemporary world. We fix the roads, we fill in the pot holes, we put in shrubs and flowers, and repaint the lines.

In our own life, if we're a believer, Jesus Christ is already living inside of us. We double down on our commitment to do what we do for his glory. To honor him to serve him. To have that focus like John had that enables us to say, "It's not about me. It's about you." I'm only here to serve you and to make you known in all that I do.

The religious authorities weren't into that perspective. They still had to ask other questions. "Why do you baptize if you're not the Christ?" It's interesting to me that John really didn't give an answer. He just said, "There's one coming after me who's already here, the thongs of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie.

Later, John said

Best commitment, best way they knew how to get right with God.

Preached at Salem Avenue. December 4, 2011 a.m.