

“Look!”
 delivered Sunday, January 16, 2011
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 John 1:29-42

A friend of mine, who is both a pastor and a theologian, Michael Lindvall, remembers that it was a Sociology Professor in college who helped him understand a basic theological tenet of the Christian faith. My friend remembers this young professor of some forty years ago, as a captivating lecturer and a professed church-going Christian. He recalls one particular class in which a student had the temerity to ask this Sociology Professor a very difficult theological question. Professor, she asked, “What do you think original sin is?” My friend presumed that her real question – in the context of sociology – was something along the lines of “What is at the root of the problems in the world?” But the professor didn’t dodge the question with a lesson on systems of human behavior, or slip into the language of a sociologist, but went straight to the theology of it, the study of God. He hesitated; he seemed to be thinking carefully. He finally said, softly, “I think that original sin is the tendency of every individual to see him or herself as the center of the universe.”

Remembering that response, these many years later in light of the problems of our world, my pastor friend says: We must admit that this tendency to see ourselves as the center of things is pretty natural – it starts with our geographical point of view. I mean, from where each one of us stands, infinity reaches out to the north, south, east and west, up and down. From where I stand, and how we look out upon the world it does rather appear that I am the center of everything! From a geographical perspective, we cannot help but look at the world from our place in it. (1) We cannot help but make sense of the things we see from the lenses through which we see them. And because we are not perfect, the way we see, and act, and engage the world is always – in some measure – sinful.

I have thought about this definition of original sin all week as I have pondered what happened last Saturday in Tucson. We have heard a lot of talk and seen a lot of finger pointing, as our nation tries to make sense of that shooting outside the Safeway, at a public gathering, in a country that has in our national DNA the freedom of assembly. We understand the questions and the discussion – it is human nature to try to make sense of it. How on earth a nine year old, a newly elected student council member, could possibly be dead for being in the right place at the wrong time. How on earth a highly respected Federal Judge, known not only for his fairness, but also his Christian faith, could be taken out by simply stopping there on his way home from Mass. Did you know that seventy-nine year old Phyllis Schneck – mother of three, grandmother of seven, great-grandmother of one – was a member of Tucson’s Northminster Presbyterian Church, where her primary activity in retirement as church volunteer. (2)

There is no making sense of these and the other lives lost, and so we talk, and we listen to more talk, and a lot of people point fingers. We blame the nature of our public discourse. We point to our problems with gun laws. And then we defend those in order to blame it all on mental illness. And then we use that to point to health care cuts in the treatment of mental illness. We have all read it, and watched it, and participated in the sense-making of it all week. But the truth of the matter is, in the complexity of what has happened and how we have reacted, the primary central player on this national stage is *sin*. In the moments those shots were taken Jared Loughner was the embodiment of human sinfulness. For that tragic and public display of his rage

made him for a time, in his own mind at least, the center of the universe. And frankly, much of pointing and blaming that has followed is also evidence of original sin, of good people assuming their particular perspective is *the* perspective.

So we gather in worship today, as residents of a country in mourning, as people of faith, and we remember that – in a time when the world was every bit as chaotic and violent as it is today, God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And maybe it's just coincidence, or maybe it's providence, that the scripture reading appointed by the Common Lectionary, to be read today by Catholic and Protestant Churches across our land begins with this proclamation: "Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

John the Baptist was at the height of his popularity. The gospels are unanimous in their inclusion of his importance as the forerunner of Jesus. Crowds thronged to him to hear his preaching. He had a following that could not be stopped. They flocked to him to be baptized in the Jordan. They leaned on his every word – with the hope that he was the one they had been waiting for since Elijah was taken up into the heavens. And in his moment of prophetic glory, what does he do? He steps to the side. John steps away from the center and points away from himself toward another. The gospels begin with John because he can do the one nearly impossible thing that is at the very core of the spiritual life. He says, "It's not about me," and he points to God who has become incarnate in Jesus Christ.

We like to leave John behind, I think, back in the middle of December and Advent, where we find him savoring locusts and dripping in wild honey, glad to get around him again – in order to welcome the babe of Bethlehem. But today it's worth remembering what difference he made in the long run. Shortly after the Gospel of John opens, John the Baptizer is under investigation by the religious leaders. They have one huge question: "Are you the Messiah?" And he answers, "I am not the Messiah." In the days that follow, according to our scripture reading, John sees Jesus repeatedly; he tells his own disciples – those who are captivated by John himself – "Look, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." And then, again, "Look! This man is the Son of God."

So taking him at his word, two of John's own disciples decide to investigate the claim. They start trailing Jesus to see what they can see. And Jesus, after awhile, wonders why these two are tagging along after him. So at some point, Jesus turns around, looks at Andrew and the other disciple and asks, "What are you looking for?" They simply ask him where he's staying, as if to say can't we just come along...? and Jesus answers them, "Come and see."

And then the gospel writer adds what may, at first reading, seem like simply an incidental detail. He looks at his watch and says, "It was four o'clock in the afternoon." Do you know what the time means? It was time the gospel writer's church gathered for worship...broke bread together, sang hymns, offered their prayers, and remembered that God is the center and circumference of the universe. What John did, when he pointed away from himself and pointed to Jesus Christ, is what we do whenever we gather for worship. Just as John knew it was not all about him, so our worship is a weekly enactment of the same confession: It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about God. Worship is nothing other than the regular rehearsal of not being the center of the universe.

A Congregational minister told the story of his college days when he lived upstairs in an apartment, above a retired music teacher who was pretty much homebound. Each morning he came downstairs, and on his way out to class, he and the music teacher engaged in a ritual of sorts. The student would open the door to the old man's apartment, and ask the same question: "Well, what's the good news?" The man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his

wheel chair and say, “That’s middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but my friend, that is middle C!” (3)

It’s a wonderful metaphor for people of faith to hang on to these days. Amid all the sadness of random acts of violence in our world, amid the finger pointing, the blaming, the banter back and forth. In a culture of relativism, where all too many people are more than willing to assume center stage, And among the human family who cannot – on our own – escape the reality of original sin, along comes John the Baptizer, a prophet and preacher extraordinaire in his own right, who steps to the side and he tunes our hearts and minds to Middle C – Jesus Christ at the Center. John models for us the Christian life and faith, that – more than anything else – helps us make sense of the world. John says: Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. If we keep pointing in that direction, we will be doing our part to help usher in the Kingdom of God. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Michael Lindvall, Pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, unpublished Moveable Feast paper on this text, 2011, with thanks for this opening illustration as well as biblical exegesis and insight.
- 2) pcusa.org news release.
- 3) Lindvall again, recalling this story of Lloyd C. Douglas, author of *The Robe*, who served a church in Ann Arbor where Michael used to live.