

**January 9, 2022**  
**Salisbury United Church**  
**John the Baptist, part 1**  
**The Season of Epiphany**

At the time that I am recording this sermon, we are still in the midst of the deepfreeze. It is -31 out this morning, which is a big disincentive to poke your nose outside or go anywhere. Another disincentive is the roads, which are proving to be more like a skating rink than I can remember in some time. Of course, if the temperature does reach 7 above as they say it will next week, we'll be sloughing through slush, which is also not a recommendation to be zooming around. Some travel is of course necessary but you'd best pick what you are on the road for carefully. It would never do to risk getting into a skid that takes you sailing into the midst of the intersection over something less than necessary. Or as I was told once, "Pick your ditch carefully, you will be in it for the next 200 miles."

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, was good at distinguishing the necessary risk from the unnecessary and at staying focussed on what was his particular task to do in life. You may have caught the line in our scripture readings that said that he had not yet been arrested, a reminder that eventually the King of Israel, Herod, would have him beheaded, and I won't get into the grisly details here. But if you are heading into a collision like that, you'd best be sure that the collision is worth the ride. "I must decrease", John said, so his focus had to be keen and precise.

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My grown-up kids and I have sometimes played a game which a bit like a version of the deserted island game. You know, if you were cast away on a desert island what would be the 10 things you would take with you. Only in this version of the game you can't take anything with you. The game goes like this. If you knew today was your last day on earth, (and we're not saying why you are leaving it – aliens, an interdimensional portal, death – whatever you prefer) what would you want to do with that day. It has been more my question that theirs and sometimes what I get back is a grumpy shrug of the shoulders. But sometimes we will talk about what would be the important things to do on that day. Calling or being with family and friends. Putting affairs in order. Making a great meal of favorite foods. Giving things away. Performing as many acts of kindness as you can. The thought might seem strange but the list does say something about what matters to each of us along with what we might have taken for granted or overlooked in life. There are things that get left out of any list that might be worth reviewing. Prayer, a walk in the park, a hug, sitting out under the stars temperature allowing, breathing deeply, smiling. It's the things we leave out that are as telling as the things we include.

I can't help but wonder what John may have forgotten. His list was pretty clear. He came to be the one who was a witness to a greater light than himself. He knew his spark of light would diminish and he was not there to build a monument like a tower of light to himself. His tasks were to baptise, to call people to a return to grace, to

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repentance, to build up their anticipation until his cousin Jesus was ready to go public.

He was a kind of advance agitator if you will. And John stuck to that quite well, even when he was tempted, when he was asked if he was not perhaps, after all, the great one everyone was expecting. The things John didn't do, or at least that he in not remembered as doing, include not setting up shop in cities and town for to do his work. Not for him was the draw of human community. And he was not great at talking about things like love and wisdom and courage and humility. He was fierce and driven, but love wasn't really on his agenda. Nor was he inclined to be a healer of hearts or minds. His talk was rough and sometimes disturbing. In some ways, it's the things that John left out that tell us the most about what was to come after him, after he had completed his life's task. Indeed it's what John left out that Jesus came to fulfill.

There's good news in that for us. If life were a single day we simply could not pack all that we would want to include and that we overlook to do into it. But we don't have to. Slipping and sliding along life's roads, risking life and limb and ending up in a ditch to carry something that is not ours to carry is not necessary. There is a fulfillment for the world in Jesus' life that none of us are responsible for on our own in our lives. We *are* responsible for our own bit of it, for witnessing to the light that he bears into the world, the way John was a witness. And sometimes that requires risk, a risk that is worth the accident. But the difference is for us that Jesus has already come into the world and has

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visited us. Our own witness is not to what is about to arrive, but to what has already happened and how that happening, the life of Jesus, has shaped our lives and our way of being in the world – our hearts, minds and souls. Jesus was all about love and mercy, and the way that the grace of God challenges the human community to renew itself as a reflection of that love and mercy. We are not the light – there is one greater than us who is the light – we are pointers to a light that shines and that darkness, even the darkness at the close of our last day, cannot overcome it.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote these verses as part of her poem called “May you go easy”

I am so distant from the hope of myself,  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, “Stay awhile.”  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,  
“and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine.”