

Yesterday at Market Basket in Portsmouth, I ran into some friends of friends. We've known each other for years and even vacationed together, along with our mutual friends; but we weren't in Amesbury or Newburyport where we usually get together, nor were we in York where I live, nor Merrimack where they live and our friends weren't with us. The three of us were all bundled up for winter. I mention all this because they didn't recognize me. Only when I called them by name and took off my hat did they realize who I was.

A main focus of the passage we just heard is identification. John the Baptist recognizes Jesus as the Christ (the anointed or chosen one) and he draws our attention to Jesus. Jesus is the one they'd been waiting for....the one we still rely on today for hope, help, and healing.

The gospel writer has John the Baptist borrowing the words of Prophet Isaiah speaking to a troubled, oppressed, and hurting community. It's important that we know that Isaiah was speaking words of comfort and consolation because gospel writer John's audience would have known that. When we understand that, those words can bring us a sense of hope for a better life, an improved community, and a healthier world.

We hear about a voice 'crying out in the wilderness'. Anytime you see the word wilderness in Scripture, you can bet that it's a place where things are wild....a mess...difficult to get through...even dangerous. You've surely heard the expression, 'he's out of the woods now' with regard to illness.

'The woods' is illness. It's also being bullied, or sexually harassed, or addiction. The woods' is maxed out credit cards, human rights atrocities, worrying about your children and your parents. 'The woods' are what slaves fought their way through, running for their very lives, when they sought freedom. They're where refugees and asylum seekers find themselves today.

You don't have to stay in an oppressive, limiting, or painful place. You can make it through the woods with God's help, but you've got to prepare the way for God.

According to James Strong's Hebrew Dictionary of the Bible, the word "prepare means 'to turn, to face, look, appear'; "the way" means 'a road, a course of life, a mode of action'. To me, this means dedicating yourself to God and living by Christ's example.

As Christians, we typically think of ourselves as disciples—or followers of Jesus, but the truth is that *if we are His followers*, we can also go out ahead of him to talk about him. Jesus sent disciples out ahead of him to prepare the way several times in the Bible. He did it in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 9-11 and in the Gospel of Luke 10 when he sent 70 disciples ahead to the towns he'd be visiting. He sent them ahead in a boat in one place and ahead to get a donkey at Palm Sunday. He sent them ahead to prepare the way.

That's our job, too. And it's one that we may give little thought to. In one church I served, the congregation thought it was (only) the pastors' job to talk about God and to invite people to church. I suggest to you that it's part of every person of faith's call to do so as well. Prepare the way in your heart, your life, your community, and your world.

There are people out there who don't know Jesus. And there are more of them than you can even imagine. Just this week, I learned of another church in our denomination, right here in Maine where a

member had invited a music student of his to come play in church. The 21-year old man got up before he played and he said that he had never been in a church before and had no idea what to expect. (He was pleasantly surprised by the reception he received.)

He had never been to church. Friends, it's not 1955 or even 1975. We don't have 2 services and 300 children in Sunday School. Where in the world is the world getting its 'faith fix'? Where is it getting gassed up for the week? Where is the hope?

In our passage today, John is boldly doing something that we just don't do. And it he does it over and over again: he proclaims that Jesus is the one the world has been waiting for and, he says, here's how I know it!

When the people he's been teaching hear him comment so favorably about Jesus, they immediately leave his side and go to check out Jesus.

This could only happen because they trusted John implicitly. John drew their attention to Jesus, "look!". They looked, and though they didn't quite know what they were looking at, they believed that John did. That trust is key. That personal recommendation is critical.

The Bible says that John gave 'testimony'. That's a fancy word for proof, evidence, or publicly telling about a religious experience. I'd also call it 'word of mouth promotion'. We can do it, too. We can influence people who trust us. And what we're sharing with them is, quite literally, good news. (That's what gospel means!) Everybody's got a story. What's yours?

I have had a lot of experiences that have shown me that God is real—those experiences are otherwise completely inexplicable. Let me share just one that's been on my mind recently. About 7 years ago, on a Wednesday afternoon, I put a beloved cat down. He was 18 and had been with me through a lot of transition. Sunday morning, I woke up early and felt a need to go to the beach. That's where I feel God's presence the most. The whole way there I prayed for a sign from God and from my cat that I did the right thing. For those of you who know the area, I was going from Weymouth to Nantasket Beach in Hull. It was a partly sunny day just after 6AM. When I rounded the final bend to arrive at beach parking, I saw the rainbow. I didn't even know it had rained in Hull. There was my sign. In Genesis, God said, "I do set my bow in the cloud as a sign of a covenant between you and me and every living thing." I saw that sign because I had the language. I knew the scripture. Still felt I needed a sign from my cat. After about 20 minutes of praying at the beach, I remembered. There's a poem that says when your beloved pets die, they go to heaven, but when it's time for you to cross over, they meet you at the Rainbow Bridge. I was searching for something very specific and my eyes were open, looking for it. I believe that's why I saw it.

The people in scripture today are not so different than us—they're searching for something. Jesus knows this. They're not sure what they're searching for, but Jesus invites them to draw closer. "Come and see," he says. If John the Baptist points them toward BJ's and says, that store has good prices and good products; Jesus is the person inside at lunchtime giving out free samples. "Come and see".

This is Emmanuel, God-with-us. He invites us to come, walk with him, go where he goes, abide (dwell) with him. We make the choice to do so. When you spend time with Jesus, your eyes are opened. Your eyes are opened to privilege and injustice. Your eyes are opened to possibility where none previously existed. You have new hope, you make new meaning, you have a renewed sense of purpose. And you want to share this with others!

After spending time with Jesus, the first thing the disciples did was to tell others and bring them to Him. That's our call too. Over the next few months, you'll be hearing about a new committee we're calling the Vitality Team. This team will be out at big public events like parades, putting a face on the church, because like that 21-year old who had never been to church, people drive by every single day and see a pretty white church without any idea of what happens here. You can be a part of this work, too, and you don't need to wait for an event.

My hope for you is that you will give your testimony; that you will share your stories with people you know. There are people in your circles *right now* that need the hope you have. Because of your relationship, they'll trust you. Perhaps, once you've pointed out Jesus, they'll come and see for themselves...and quite possibly, they'll be so impressed that they'll bring others. Blessed be and amen.