

“Not the One”  
Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11 and John 1:6-8 and 19-28  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
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Rev. Glen Bell

To what are we pointing?

Do you and I witness to light? or darkness? To life? or death?

Are you and I doing all we can to help people see What Really Matters?

One of the most popular programs on public television during the last decade is “Call the Midwife.” It depicts a group of nurse midwives working in the East End of London in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The series is based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, who worked with the Community of St. John the Divine, a group of faithful Anglican nuns, at their convent.

Jennifer Worth died the year before the program debuted. Not long after her death, her two daughters gathered to reflect on their experience of the filming.

“There are hundreds of thousands of women who lose their mothers,” one said. “But how many of those will live our experience, seeing our mother portrayed as a young girl, in a time before we knew her? In a way it’s helped us cope with her loss.”

“For me,” her sister added, “the character is very true to the person she became. It’s the little things, like when she’s all dressed up in her beautiful clothes to go to a concert. Mother always took a lot of pride in her appearance.

“At the same time, she was a very individual character. When Jenny in the series kicks off her high heels and trips down the street in her stockinged feet – that’s exactly what Mother was like.”

“You also get the sense from the program that Jenny is very quiet, an observer. And that’s how Mother was. She wasn’t a great one for chit-chat. Often in social situations she would take a back seat and just absorb what was going on around her.” That was true of her faith also. “She never made a big deal of religion. Her belief was a quiet thing, but it was important to her all through her life. . . . She was someone who, whatever the problem, wanted to be involved.”

Today as we wait for Christ’s coming, John the Baptist appears as a midwife.

The gospel writer begins to explain John the Baptist and his role. The first sentence deserves trumpets, both a voice before and a fanfare after. “John came as a witness, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” John is a witness, the forerunner of Jesus, the voice pointing the way to the Christ, God’s Son. He is a big deal. His role is like none other. He is absolutely essential for the faith and life and joy of discovering God in Christ.

But the next sentence is spoken with a whisper. “He himself was not the light. He came to testify to the light.” This dynamic, this decentering, is emphasized throughout the remainder of this passage. The religious leaders ask John, “Who are you? Blow your own horn!” And he responds, “I am not the Messiah. I’m not Elijah. I’m not the prophet. I’m just a voice crying out about God’s coming. I’m not worthy to be the focus of attention. I must point beyond myself to the Holy One.”

As strange as it sounds, John the baptizer is a midwife. He’s an individual who watches quietly, waiting for the moment. And when the moment comes, just as the gospel begins, he’s all in, witnessing, pointing, proclaiming, announcing, doing all he can to help people see What Really Matters. But it’s never about him.

David Bartlett taught New Testament for many years. “John,” he writes, “. . . exemplifies the confession of who he is not. There is an honorable tradition among the prophets of the self-knowledge of reticence. Amos: ‘I am no prophet nor a prophet’s son.’ Isaiah: ‘Depart from me for I am a man of unclean lips.’ Jeremiah: ‘I am only a young boy.’ The traditional Greek admonition ‘Know yourself’ surely means ‘Know who you are and who you are not.’”

That's exactly what midwives know. They know their moment. They know who they are and who they are not. They are not the doctor. They do not provide obstetrical care in the weeks and months leading up to the delivery. Yes, the mom and dad-to-be are eager to meet her, to get to know her. Yes, they have her number on speed dial. But they don't always think a lot about her in trimesters one and two. It's more about taking the vitamins and drinking lots of water and regular checkups with the ob-gyn, painting the nursery and putting together the crib.

The midwife is not a member of the family. After the labor and delivery, after the agony and the overwhelming joy, her work is done. It is her role to recede, to move out of the way, to make room for the blessings and challenges of infancy and childrearing, feeding and sleeping and bathing and growing.

It's a tricky role, essential in the most important moments, those moments of birth, the very center of attention, until it's over and then they are not.

This is what the Bible means: "John came as a witness to testify to the light." Witnessing is what it's all about for him. As Lamar Williamson notes, witnessing is all about what he has seen and heard, but never about what he himself has done. Witnessing is never about one's own action or person. It's all about pointing beyond ourselves to light and life. It's all about helping people see What Really Matters.

About two dozen members of our church are already committed to our partnership with Brentwood Elementary School. Many of them serve in the classroom, helping students, guiding their lessons, tutoring them in different activities. Brentwood is a Title 1 school. The students come from deeply challenged families. A significant number of the students are developmentally disabled.

One of our church members emails me from time to time, telling about his work in the classroom. His emails are never flashy. His accounts aren't gripping or exciting, and they never focus on him. Instead, he talks in a low-key way about getting to know the children and helping them through their activities. He points beyond himself. He talks about them.

He is the best kind of witness.

That's the thing. John the Baptist is not the only midwife. He is not the only witness. Every single one of us who follows Jesus is a witness. Our lives, our words, our actions, testify every day to the light and life of Christ.

Our faith leads us to get involved, to care and contribute, to witness. What we do and say changes lives. But we don't always know when or how it happens. Often it doesn't seem unusual or out of the ordinary.

Years ago one of my friends, Lewis Galloway, served a pastor in a rural Presbyterian church. "There was a man who had grown up in the church," he writes, "but he hardly ever attended. He was a brick mason who loved to hunt and spend time in the woods. His life was not all that happy. He suffered from emphysema. He was a heavy drinker. He had problems with his extended family. He didn't care much for the church because he said most church folks were just hypocrites.

"One day, this man's brother-in-law insulted his wife. He decided to settle the score. He drove to his brother-in-law's house and confronted him with a loaded shotgun. As he held the barrel of the gun a few inches from his brother-in-law's head, he almost pulled the trigger. Something stopped him.

"I heard his story later that same night," Lewis writes. "I was driving by the church and saw his truck parked there. . . . I stopped in and found him inside the sanctuary praying. He told me the whole story. When he finished, we talked a bit and had a prayer together. I have to tell you that I did not feel anything unusual or out of the ordinary during that moment of prayer.

"At 6:00 a.m. the next morning he was on my doorstep. He wanted me to go to the sheriff's office with him so that he could turn himself in for assaulting his brother-in-law. He said that when we prayed, he felt the anger and burdens of his life lift away and a sense of peace fill him.

"He gave up his heavy drinking. He let go of the bitterness that had marked his life. He rejected his racist past. He began to come to church. Even though he had less than a tenth grade education, he

became a voracious reader of theology and Bible. He asked me for everything I had in my library. He not only read easy books; he read books by Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr and Tillich. He read Karl Barth's commentary on Romans. He told me it was the most exciting book he had ever read.

"One day he called me on the phone and read me a quote from Barth that said there was no one, not even the most villainous person for whom God is not Father and Christ is not brother. 'Isn't that amazing?' he said. In spite of all the suspicion and criticism from his extended family, he lived with joy and a peace. He demonstrated a love for others that knew no bounds."

Sisters and brothers, the people you encounter every day – your family and friends, the students at Brentwood, the homeless on our streets, the neighbor you don't know very well, the co-worker you can't stand – they may not recognize that John the Baptist is a witness or a midwife. They may not care what your pastor said on Sunday morning.

But when you least expect it, they discover that you are a witness. You are a midwife to the birth of love.

Your care, your encouragement, your listening, your prayer – it may not feel unusual or out of the ordinary to you.

But by God's grace and power, you change the world. You witness to the light. You point to What Really Matters. You love and love and love and love.

You make all the difference, in Jesus' name.