

Artists often show John the Baptist pointing at something whenever they draw him or paint him. An example of this is actually the picture on the front of your bulletin for today. It's part of a larger work by a man named Matthias Grünewald. And in that work, Grünewald has John pointing at the crucified Christ. But you may notice in that picture that his finger is a little bit longer than it should be. He has a weirdly long index finger. But that was entirely intentional on Grünewald's part. He meant for it to be weirdly long so that we would look at it. Because John is one who has come to point at what Jesus has come to do. John the Evangelist, for example, earlier in the Gospel says, verses 6 through 8: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." So bearing witness to Jesus, pointing at him, is what we find John doing in our Gospel reading for today.

Because in our reading, the Jews have sent messengers to John in the wilderness. Bethany across the Jordan, where John was, was somewhere near the Sea of Galilee, several miles north of Jerusalem. So this wasn't just a pleasant visit. It wasn't just casually trying to figure out who John was. They had a very serious question. They traveled all of those miles north to ask John: "Who are you?" And they don't mean "Who are you?" in the sense of "What is your name? What do you do? Where do you come from?", that sort of thing. They mean "Who are you?" in the sense of "Who do you claim to be? Who do you say that you are?" Because everybody in Israel at that time was looking for the coming of Christ. They were excited for it. They were anxious for it. And so they go to John asking him this, because they're really asking: "Are you the Christ? Are you the promised one? Are you the king who was supposed to come? Are you the fulfillment of all of God's promises?" But John answers: "I am not. I am not the Christ. I'm not the one who's coming. I'm not the fulfillment of the promises. I am not the king. I'm somebody else."

"Well, then, who are you?" they asked. "Perhaps you're Elijah?" Because Malachi the prophet once said, Malachi chapter 4: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes." So God had promised, then, to send Elijah before the great day of the Lord would come. Elijah would come first. And so, are you, John, are you Elijah? The Jews actually misunderstood what Malachi was trying to say. Because Malachi was not saying that the literal Elijah would come, which is what the Jews were looking for. Because Elijah went up into heaven without dying, and they figured that must mean that he's going to come back, that the literal Elijah will come down and be among us once more. But Malachi never meant that. Malachi did not mean that the literal prophet would come. Malachi always meant, as Jesus says, that the one would come in the spirit of Elijah, one would come in his office. And so that's why John says, "I am not. I'm not Elijah. I'm not the literal prophet Elijah", even though he had come in his office, had come in his spirit.

"Well, then, if you aren't Elijah," they said, "maybe you're the Prophet?" Because you'll remember in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy chapter 18, God says this: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." So God promised that a prophet like Moses would come after him, one who would speak in his name, one who would be just as great as Moses ever was. But throughout all of the time of the Old Testament, all of the Old Testament prophets, there were none quite like Moses. None knew God face-to-face the way that Moses had done. Not even Elijah, for that matter. And so they knew that this prophet was still to come. This prophet was still somewhere in the future for them. And so they ask him: "Well, John, are you

that Prophet?" But John is getting a little bit irritated now. He's a little tired of all these questions. And so he says very shortly, very simply: "No."

But the messengers are also getting a little bit irritated too. They say, "Well, what are we supposed to say, then? We can't just go back home and say nothing. We have to have an answer for those who sent us! Who are you? What do you say about yourself?" And John, in answer, doesn't point to himself. He doesn't say, "My name is John, and this is where I'm from, and this is what I have come to do." He simply answers in the words of our reading, verse 23: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." All that John wants them to know, all that he points them towards is Jesus. He is the fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 40. He is the one who has come to do one thing, and that is to point at the one who is to come.

And even his baptizing does the same thing. Even his baptizing points at Jesus. Because baptism existed before the time of John in Israel, but the only time they would baptize anybody was when they were foreigners who had become converts towards God. They would wash them clean of all of their sins of their former way of living, and now they would become part of Israel. But John was baptizing everybody. It didn't matter if they were pagans or Jews. He was baptizing everybody, which showed that something new had come. Something new was here. Which is why the Jews asked him, "Well, why are you doing this if you aren't the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet? Why are you doing this thing that shows that something new has come if you are none of these things?" And John tells them very simply, "I baptize with water. But what I am doing points towards the one who is coming, the one you do not know." And as he says in the other Gospels, "He will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Spirit. So look at him! Get ready for his coming, because he is already here!" In everything, just like in that picture on your bulletin. John is a pointing finger, pointing at Christ who is to come.

But what about you, Christians? Where do you point? Do you point towards Jesus in your lives, so that others see him through you? Or do you point towards something else, especially towards yourself, so that's all that people ever see? For example, do you point towards Jesus in your words and in what you say? So that people know that you are Christians simply by the way that you talk? Paul, for example, in Ephesians chapter 4 says: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." And by corrupting talk here, Paul is not talking about bad words, as if we shouldn't just use bad words. Someone could never say a bad word in their life, and they still wouldn't be doing what Paul is talking about. But rather what he means is that we as Christians are called to speak what is good and not what is evil. To say the things that build up and not things that tear down. To give God thanks through what we say, to show Jesus to all around us through our words. And in that way, we point towards Jesus with our mouths.

Or, for example, do you point towards Jesus in your actions and in what you do? Paul again says, 1 Corinthians chapter 6: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." Now, Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 is talking specifically about how we live sexually, but it equally applies to everything that we do. Do we say that we believe in God? That's good. We should do that. But it's not enough to just say it. We also need to show it through what we do. Because we are the temple of God, Christians. Think about that. Really

think about that. God himself lives in every Christian heart. You are God's temple. And if we treat this building with respect, because we say that this is God's house, and rightly so, how much more so should we treat our bodies with respect, because we are the temple of the living God? So we are called, then, to keep ourselves away from evil, to do what is right in our actions, in everything that we do. And in that way we point towards Jesus with our bodies.

Or as one last example, do you point towards Jesus in your thoughts, in the way that you think? Paul again says, Romans chapter 12: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." So in other words, Christians, do you say that something is good because God says that it's good or because the world says that it's good? And likewise do you say that something is evil because God says it's evil or because the world says that it's evil? And if the world shapes our thoughts and opinions, Christians, then we're not going to listen to what God has to say. We may even find ourselves offended by what God says or thinking that it's out of date, that it no longer applies to our times. If the world shapes our thinking, we will be conformed to it. We will act like it. We will think like it in everything. But if God shapes our thoughts and our opinions, then we will be conformed to him. We will act like him. We will think like him. We will even say that something is good when God says that it's good, even if all the rest of the world says that it's evil. And so in that way, Christians, we point towards Jesus even with our minds.

So in all these ways, we are called to be like John. To be that pointing finger, pointing towards Jesus in everything. Pointing towards Jesus in what we say. Pointing towards Jesus in what we do. Pointing towards Jesus in what we think. And bearing witness to Jesus to all who are around us. And Christians, may we so clearly point towards Jesus in all that we do so that others will know that we belong to him without us ever having to say that we are Christians. God grant it for Jesus sake!

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus and to point us towards his coming. Help us also to point towards your Son in everything so that we may bear witness to him in all the world. In his name we pray. Amen.