

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 17 & 18, 2011
John Crosby
Love That Shows Up as Emmanuel
John 1:15-34

Hey, how many of you, yourselves or somebody in your immediate family, how many of you were born within two or three weeks of Christmas one way or the other? Raise your hands. Let's pray for these people right now. You are the forgotten children, aren't you? For you, every gift was a bargain and everybody goes, "Oh, and this is for your birthday, too" because your birthday is in danger of being swallowed up by *the* birthday, *the* story.

Christmas is really a story of two birthdays, a narrative of two children, cousins, who have birthdays close to one another. We really only hear about the famous one, about Baby Jesus, but his cousin was so closely linked to Jesus that they actually met even when they were in their respective mothers' wombs, and when Jesus' mom walked into the room, John the Baptist inside his mom started banging. He said, "Hey, hey! Good to see You! Good to see You!" They must have been close their whole lives. Then in the blink of an eye, just like the kids that were up here, they grow up, and one day John gives another shout-out to his cousin. He sees Him differently than He has ever seen him at all the weddings and all the funerals and all the festivals that they must have attended in the decades that they were growing up.

Now remember, at this point Jesus is nobody. He is either just a failed carpenter who now is trying a second career as an itinerant rabbi or somebody just down to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. John the Baptist is the rock star. He is the one everybody knows, whom everybody is coming to see. For the first time in 400 years, people start to believe that this might actually be a prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah or Isaiah coming to tell what the future holds, not a revolutionary. John is calling people back to God in a powerfully effective way. One day John is out by the River Jordan preaching and baptizing, and he sees his cousin walking toward him. Then as he is baptizing Jesus, his cousin, at that moment right there, something odd happens. The text picks up the story in John 1:29. It says,

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him." ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

There is an odd phrase here that I haven't picked up on in 40 years that comes twice. John the Baptist says two different times, “the Lamb of God.” Yeah, I knew that one, but he also said, “I myself did not know Him.” Jesus and John grew up together. They fought each other and ran and played pranks together and had snacks together. They knew each other. They probably discovered girls together, the whole thing. If John was to know anybody, he would know this cousin that he was yelling at in the womb but he says, “I myself did not know Him.” Something must have happened that day he baptized Jesus when the Spirit came down so that he saw Jesus in a whole different way.

Well, with all the attention that John draws to Jesus, Jesus starts to become popular, even more popular than John the Baptist. Jesus becomes the preacher of the day, the Billy Graham. Some people think He is not Billy Graham; they think He is Joel Osteen, not a regular preacher. They had very divided opinions about Jesus. In John 3 John's disciples came him.

²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

Unsaid, “Everybody is leaving *You*.”

²⁷ To this John replied, “A person can receive only what is given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.’ ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.”

You have heard that in Sunday School all your life. “He must increase; I must decrease.” Well, that is exactly what happened. Things never end well for prophets in Israel. They get fame and then they get killed. John tells the king, “You should not marry your brother's wife,” and to repay him for his truth-telling, the king has him killed, but before that, while he is in jail, Matthew chapter 11 says

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

They have grown up together. They are adults together. One baptizes the other, and then the last time we hear John's voice, he is saying, “Are You the one? Really?” Do you ever see somebody and you have known them well, but you are just not sure if it is them? That is what is happening here. When John looks at Jesus, sometimes he so sure it is his cousin. Other times he is so sure it is the Messiah, but sometimes he is just confused.

That is what I wanted to talk about this morning. Are you sure, or are you a little bit confused? Sometimes you can see something so long, it is just your cousin, or it is just the Baby Jesus, that you get confused. Sometimes you have to look at something through fresh eyes. Look at this image up on the screen (*slide shown*). Some of you have seen it before and understand immediately what is going on, but others of you are going, "That's sticks." And if I said to you, "No, no, that is not a bunch of sticks, that is Jesus." Some of you would go, "Uh-huuuuuh." Others of you would see it immediately. We are not quite sure because it is out of context. That is what has happened to John. He expected Jesus, but then Jesus changes the whole script. It is like they are in a play together and John says, "It is You. You've shown up at last. You are the hero." And all of a sudden, the hero goes off script and starts acting in a strange way, out of balance.

Bishop N. T. Wright writes that Jesus doesn't have much of the Messiah that John has been teaching about. He is not calling for a revolution against Rome. He is not saying, "I am going to take over and be the king and sit in the temple. I am not necessarily going to rescue My cousin John. He may very well die." Jesus is saying nothing about His cousin John. His cousin John is going, "Excuse me. Prison. Bad things about to happen. You're the Messiah. What is going on? Are You the one?" Then John hears that Jesus is spending all of His time with all of the wrong people. He is walking around with prostitutes. He is actually touching lepers. He is becoming friends with women. He is not ashamed to be with the poor. He is blessing thieves, people who have been robbing us blind. "What kind of Messiah are You?" Jesus disappoints John the Baptist because He doesn't do what John thought He was going to do.

A lot of you today may be disappointed by Jesus because He is not doing what you thought He would do. John the Baptist was disappointed because he was the prophet of judgment on the wicked and Jesus keeps talking about mercy. You know, just like sinful people, sinful people don't like the message of judgment because they think, and rightly so, that it is aimed at them. Sometimes good people don't like the message of mercy because you think, wrongly, that people are going to get away with their sins; but mercy was at the heart of Jesus' mission, and it is supposed to be at the heart of the church's work today. Often that is not the script that people want to hear, the Messiah they want to recognize, but it is how God is at work.

When your vision of Jesus clouds over, what do you see at Christmas? We get so busy Jesus almost becomes an add-on. When you look at Jesus, what do you see? Do you see an image sort of like this? Look at the screen (*slide shown*). Clear as day, right? There is Jesus looking out at you. Some of you are going, "John has been drinking too much of the Kool-Aid." Now when I look at it, because I have stared at this for far too long, I immediately see it. Many of you don't. Many of you don't because you are not sure what you are looking for. That is what happens with John the Baptist. At the end, he is not sure what he is looking for. At Christmas God's love shows up unexpectedly. Sometimes Christmas is all the expected stuff and God's love does not show up for you. It is just Christmas. How does John see Jesus for whom He really is?

Well, I think the way it starts for any of us is, you have got to want to see it. You have got to want to believe that God *will* show up, that the wrong *will* be righted, the last *will* be first and God *will* give you water for your soul. Sometimes we forget that when we are thirsty, the Holy Spirit walks Jesus across our path. Remember how it says in the text, "My heart leapt with joy when I heard the groom's voice." John had been waiting. Are you waiting? Do you hear the groom's voice? The problem is that John had heard that voice all his life. Remember, he had heard the

voice in the womb, but now it is not his cousin. It is not a rabbi. It is not a friend. Now John has to be willing to kneel. That is the problem for many of you, certainly not for me, for many of *us*. We don't recognize Jesus because we are standing like *this* instead of kneeling like *this*. When we have the right angle, we can see whom Jesus is. At the end of his life, John does not see his younger, unknown cousin. He sees the King. He says, "He must increase, and I must decrease." John isn't thinking he is a worm, but he is recognizing the voice of the King. Do you recognize the dangerous voice of the King? Has the King said anything to you lately that would shape your life and make you think that maybe God is not finished with you yet? You have to want to see Him. You have to be willing to kneel if you want to see Jesus at Christmas. Even the best of us get off track. John the Baptist was the best of us, but he got off track.

You have to ask, "Are You the one? Are You the one or am I just making this up? Are You the one or is this just religion?" John asks, "Are You the one?" and Jesus says, "Look! Look at what you see. The blind can see, and the lepers are healed. The naked are clothed. The prisoners are freed. The poor have good news. Isn't that what we wanted?" We have to recognize that love that shows up is not only unexpected, it is not a one-time shot, it is a process. Some days you will see Him and hear His voice, and other times you will go, "All I see is a blur. I need help." And you do.

I just want you to leave your preconceptions of whom God has to be. "Well, God has to be like this because I read it in the Book." "God has to be like that because, well, that is only fair." "God has to do this." Are your preconceptions getting in the way of whom the King really is? Are you one who says, "It is all about mercy, baby," and you can live anyway you want. Or are you one who says, "It is all about living right," but you are missing the person. Is Jesus coming into focus for you this Christmas? We are going to close by singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* because Heather pointed out to me that one of the lines in there says,

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail the incarnate Deity.

When God puts skin on, God comes close, but He is veiled and unexpected unless we are thirsty, unless we kneel, and unless we ask.

Lord Jesus, I thank You very much that You come in unexpected ways because otherwise I would probably just put You under the tree. I thank You that Your voice can still surprise me, and I ask You, please, whether it is through the songs or the children or the stories of the old, to speak to us. Let us see You in the world around us. Let us carry Your message of holiness and mercy in our hearts out of this place. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.