

Prepare the Way

"Follow Me in Anticipation" Series, December 21 & 22, 2024 | Mark 1:6-8

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Be careful where you're pointing.

In 2023, GPS pointed a pair of tourists in Hawaii in the wrong direction.

The pair wanted to go on a manta-ray tour, so they entered the business address in their GPS and started driving. GPS's directions took them NEAR the tour office and down a boat ramp.

Witnesses say they saw the two tourists drive down the boat ramp and into the harbor confidently and with a smile on their faces, totally unaware of what they were actually doing. As their partially submerged minivan started filling with water, bystanders called out to them to get out of the van.

With help, the tourists unbuckled and made it to dry land shortly before their van sank nose-first into the water.

In response, one Hawaii official had a piece of advice for drivers, "If you see a body of water, don't drive towards it."¹

GPS always points us in a direction; sometimes, it's the wrong direction.

We all depend on something to point us in a direction.

Some of the things we rely on are tangible, like GPS or road signs, maps, and compasses. We may even rely on things like landmarks; that's my favorite way to navigate.

Some of the things we rely on to point ourselves in a direction are intangible. We rely on things like intuition or gut feelings or advice from people we trust. We may even be guided by unwritten rules, traditions, and expectations.

We all rely on things that point us in a direction.

Similarly, our words and actions always point people somewhere.

People around us are watching what we do and listening to what we say.

Our words and our actions point people somewhere, whether we mean to or not.

Where are you pointing people?

Are you pointing people in a good or a bad direction?

Are you pointing people toward light or into darkness?

Are you pointing people toward God or toward something or someone else?

John the Baptist was clearly a prophet who pointed people somewhere.

John looked like a prophet.

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/tourists-hawaii-gps-drove-car-into-water-2023-5>

In Mark 1:6 we saw that he was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt. That was a mark of a prophet. (Or, since you have two objects: Those were the marks of a prophet.) Zechariah talked about prophets wearing hairy cloaks to identify themselves.

John ate locusts and wild honey—odd foods, but both ritually clean. Plus, these are the kinds of things one would survive on in the wilderness. These foods emphasize that John lived on the edge of society and spoke into that society, proclaiming the Word of God from the wilderness.

John specifically called to mind the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament.

Elijah was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He stood with God when most of the people of the land were turning away from God and to idols. Elijah confronted the kings of his era because they were pointing people away from God. Elijah worked miracles.

Here is a description of Elijah in **2 Kings 1:8** where we find messengers coming back to speak to the king:

They [the messengers] answered him [the king], "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

John looked a lot like Elijah. And he reminded people of Elijah.

The Bible tells us that Elijah did not die but was taken into heaven in a chariot of fire. **2 Kings 2:11** records what happened as Elijah was walking and talking with his apprentice:

And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

Elijah's dramatic ascension left people expecting his return—and when they saw John the Baptist, they were reminded of Elijah.

John fulfilled a role prophesied to belong to a messenger who would prepare people for Messiah.

The prophets foretold that God would send a Savior, a deliverer, the Messiah.

Some prophets said that there would be a messenger who would come BEFORE Messiah to prepare the way of the Lord. That one will come in the wilderness. **Malachi 3:1** says:

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

But then Malachi got more specific in **Malachi 4:5-6**:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Before Messiah came, people expected to see Elijah.

They looked at John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus the Messiah, and saw Elijah.

Was John literally Elijah on earth again? No. But he was one like Elijah preparing the way.

Some messages are so clear that they're hard to miss or misunderstand.

Like shaking our heads to indicate "no."

Shaking our head is an almost universal human sign for "no" or disagreement.

And some people think that it is hard-wired into us. Think about it. When a baby doesn't want any more food, a baby will move head from left to right.

Unless you're in Bulgaria, (where nodding means "no",) a person shaking their head is unmistakable."²

Some messages are so clear that they're hard to miss or misunderstand.

God is sending us messages today.

God speaks to us through Scripture; when we read it and listen to its message, we are hearing from God.

God speaks to us today as well through prayer, through others, and through our circumstances.

God doesn't contradict what He has said in the past, nor does He say something entirely new. Instead, God speaks to us today about how to follow Him and about what He wants from us.

God is sending us messages today.

Are you missing or misunderstanding messages from God?

John was a prophet bringing messages from God and pointing people in a direction.

God is sending us messages today.

Are you listening? Or are you missing what He's saying to you today?

John pointed people to Jesus, the long-awaited Savior.

John pointed to Jesus who is higher than the baptizer or anyone else.

In verse seven, John emphasized that the one to come (Jesus) was someone so high that John didn't have a right to bend down and tie or untie his shoelaces!

John was indicating that Jesus was higher in standing and authority than John.

But as the Son of God, Jesus is higher in standing and authority than ANYONE.

John pointed to Jesus who is mightier than anyone before or since.

In verse eight, John described Jesus' power. John claimed that he was baptizing with water. That's a ritual of purification, a way of saying that we are new people, and a way of showing that we want to be cleansed of sin. It's a powerful symbol, but depends on the individual's repentance and desire for God's forgiveness. John baptized with water.

By contrast, John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire! Jesus acts with the real power of the Son of God and sends the Holy Spirit into the world. He judges, his judgment is real and effective, and the Bible describes his judgment as being like fire; it destroys and purifies. John wants us to know that Jesus is serious and powerful. Mightier than anyone before or since.

John pointed to Jesus who is the long-awaited Savior.

The prophets told us that God would send a Savior.

They promised a Savior for centuries who would change us, change things between us and God, and who would fundamentally change the world. Jesus is that Savior.

² <https://www.uni-stuttgart.de/en/university/news/all/kopfschuetteln/?t>

But do we really need a Savior?

Did goldfish really NEED Mick Madden to be their self-appointed savior?

Mick Madden had two goldfish, Malcolm and Ethel.

Mick felt sorry for Malcolm and Ethel, though, because their fish tanks gave them only one, relatively boring view of the world. He thought they needed more.

So, Mick, a metalworker, designed and built a portable tank on wheels for the goldfish. He used the portable tank to take them for walks safely.³

Mick tried to market his tank, but no one was buying.

And one has to wonder—did Malcolm and Ethel really appreciate the walks?

Did goldfish really NEED Mick Madden to save them? But that raises a bigger question--

Do we really need a Savior?

John the Baptist was pointing people to Jesus, the long-awaited Savior.

But do we really need a savior? Just as goldfish didn't really need Mick Madden as their savior, we often think we don't need saving.

Do we really have problems? Big problems?

Do those problems really need solutions?

Can we not solve those problems ourselves?

John pointed people to Jesus as the only one who could truly save them. Do YOU recognize your need for Him today? It's one of the most fundamental questions.

Jesus is the only solution to humanity's most fundamental problems.

Creation: God made the world and everything in it intentionally.

God created you and me. On purpose. And it wasn't even difficult. He did it by just speaking.

While we may not recognize it at first, Jesus is still part of creation. The New Testament tells us that Jesus was there in the beginning, creating.

God creating the world through Jesus answers one of our most fundamental questions: **Am I an accident?** People ask this question all the time in various ways. Sometimes we ask it philosophically when we hear that some people think that the universe exploded into being simply according to natural laws or by random chance. If everything happened according to natural laws and random chance, then there would be no inherent purpose or value to our lives. But the question gets more personal as well. Sometimes we wonder if we were a mistake.

But Jesus shows us that God is good and loving. God created with purpose. We are no accident. Nor are we a mistake. God created us out of love and on purpose.

Brokenness: When we sinned, we broke everything.

In chapter two of God's Story, we disobeyed God. Death entered the world. We became broken; we broke our relationships with God and with each other; we broke the world itself.

³ <https://www.wired.com/2007/01/briton-invents/>

However, Jesus is part of this chapter, too. Because when we sinned, we wanted to fix everything ourselves. But we couldn't. The damage was too much for us to fix. But God had a plan.

And we are reminded that once again God is answering one of our fundamental problems and questions: **Can I fix what's wrong with me?** We want to fix what's wrong with us and with the world ourselves. But we can't. And we don't have to.

Jesus is the God-sized solution to the problem of sin that we cannot fix ourselves. God's plan to address our brokenness culminated in sending Jesus as our Savior

Jesus: When we could not save ourselves, God sent Jesus to save us.

In Jesus, God took on human flesh, came to us, and became one of us. Jesus is fully God and fully human. Fully human, Jesus paid the price for our sin. Fully divine, Jesus paid the FULL price for our sin by dying on the cross. Then God raised Jesus from the dead—victorious over sin, death, and evil. Now, everyone who places faith in Him can be saved!

This chapter is all about Jesus!

And this chapter answers another of humanity's fundamental questions and problems: **Am I just on my own?** This is one step deeper than asking if I can fix what's wrong with me. If I am completely on my own, then I not only have to handle all of my own problems myself, but I am fundamentally alone. Are we alone or not? That's the question.

Jesus shows us that we are not alone! God is with us. God is for us and not against us. We are not alone!

Church: When we accept Jesus, we are adopted into God's family and mission.

When we become followers of Jesus, we are adopted into God's family and given new life. We are made part of the Church. We get God the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit helps us to live new and holy lives. The Holy Spirit gives us gifts for serving God so that we can make new disciples of Jesus and bring them to God for God's glory.

The Church is the body of Christ. Jesus chooses to work through us.

And that answers another of humanity's fundamental problems: **Does my life matter?** We live for a purpose! God has given us gifts, and He wants us to use them to serve Him! We matter!

Again, Jesus alone solves the problem of meaning in human life; Jesus gives our lives purpose.

But our story doesn't end with this life—Jesus promises something even greater.

Return: Now we live in hope as we wait for Jesus to return and restore all things.

Jesus, who rose from the dead, promised that He would come again. When He does, He will make the fallen world as it is into the world as it should be. He will resurrect us, and we will live with Him forever.

Jesus brings history to an end, vanquishes evil, ushers in eternity, and rules forever.

And that answers probably the most fundamental human problem of all: **What happens next?** We all wonder what happens next. What is the future going to be like? Is there a future for me after death? What is life after death like?

In Jesus, we are resurrected to live eternally in a resurrected world.

People are dying without the only solution to humanity's most fundamental problems.

People are already asking humanity's most fundamental questions. They are already struggling with our biggest problems.

But without Jesus, they have no answers, no solutions.

Instead, they flounder. And hurt. Most of the people I talk with about life and faith who do not have Jesus in their lives are asking these questions, and they aren't coming to good answers.

Because the answers can be found only in Jesus!

That means people we know and love are dying without the solutions to humanity's most fundamental problems. That ought to feel like a weight we cannot bear.

Let's commit to point people to Jesus this Christmas and beyond.

Pointing people to Jesus is just what disciples of Jesus do.

John wasn't exactly a disciple of Jesus; his ministry ended as Jesus' ministry began. But his mission was clear. He pointed people to Jesus.

Just as John pointed people to Jesus, we at Valley are committed to advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe that's essential to following Jesus.

As disciples of Jesus, we are personally sharing the Gospel across the street—in the places where we live, work, and play. Will you join us?

And we are diligently proclaiming the Gospel around the world. Will you help?

Christmas is a good time to point people to Jesus clearly.

You will be surrounded by family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors this time of year. There are going to be lots of chances to talk with people.

As you talk, this might be a good time to have a deeper conversation with someone that begins with Jesus and ends with a chance to make a decision. In the middle you share the Good News about Jesus.

Those are the most important conversations we ever have.

But not every relationship allows for clear, direct conversations about Jesus.

Christmas is a good time to point people to Jesus quietly.

It may be through your loving actions. When everyone else is busy and distracted, you can serve people patiently and quietly.

It may be through asking good questions. One of my favorite questions is, "What is God doing in YOUR life?" It starts a conversation, makes God the center of it, opens up some honest reflection, and gives you a chance to talk about what God is doing in your own life.

You may even point people to Jesus quietly by telling your own story. God is always the hero of our stories, and Jesus is the main character. People have a difficult time arguing with your own story, so feel free to tell it!

Pointing people to Jesus is critically important!

This past summer, storms rolled through northern Georgia, and power went out.

People started their generators to power their homes and keep them cool.

Marko and Kimberlie Pekez started their generator to keep their family of six comfortable. Then they went to bed and fell asleep. Shortly after they fell asleep, they heard an alarm that woke them. One family member was dizzy. Another had a headache. They went outside and waited because their alarm had already alerted 911. Firefighters tested for carbon monoxide in the home. Sure enough, the CO level in the house was at a lethal level.⁴ There was a poisonous, invisible, odorless gas in the house killing them, and the carbon monoxide alarm pointed it out and pointed them to safety. And that's what John did for the people of the first century. He pointed out their invisible, deadly sin problem and pointed them to Jesus, the Savior. And that's what we are called to do today.

Whom will you point to Jesus this Christmas?

Christmas is a good time to START pointing people to Jesus. There is no time like Christmas to get people together and no time like Christmas to talk about God.

But Christmas is just the time to start! KEEP pointing people to Jesus because the job is not done when the decorations come down and the parties end.

Whom can you point toward Jesus this Christmas?

Let's commit together to point people toward Jesus, our only hope.

⁴ <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/generators-co-poisoning-cherokee-county-couples-warning>