

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2017

Opening Act

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Let's see if you can complete this sentence.

This should be an easy one for anyone over about 40...

"I'm Ed McMahon, and Heeeeeeeere's _____ [Johnny] _____ !"

For 30 years, from 1962 – 1992,

Ed McMahon used those words to introduce Johnny Carson
on the Tonight Show.

McMahon's extroverted personality,
with that boisterous, deep voice and constant laughter
was a contrast to Johnny Carson,
who was notoriously shy.

Somehow, McMahon was the perfect compliment to the main act,
and he never upstaged Carson.

That's what a good opening act is supposed to do.

The opening act serves to "warm up" the audience,
to just the right level of excitement and enthusiasm
as it anticipates the headliner.

At a rock concert,

the opening act will usually be an up-and-coming artist or group
with a much smaller following than the featured artist.

In today's gospel reading,

John the Baptist is the opening act for the coming of the Messiah:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight...

In John and Jesus' case though,

John has developed quite a following,

and Jesus comes on the scene relatively unknown.

It is John's introduction of Jesus,

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,
that gives Jesus his start.

In several of the famous paintings of John the Baptist
the prophet is portrayed
dressed in camel hair and leather belt,
with his finger pointing away from himself
and toward Jesus,
an artistic expression of John's declaration:
He must increase, but I must decrease.

John knows that the opening act shouldn't draw so much attention to itself
that it overshadows the main performer.
Opening acts aren't supposed to steal the show.

You've probably heard speaker introductions
in which the introducer called too much attention to himself
or spoke too long,
or gave better delivery than the main speaker.

You may remember, back during the 2008 presidential election,
the candidates were roasting each other at the Alfred E. Smith Dinner.
– and please, this is about politicians,
but not a partisan comment.

John McCain had finished an absolutely hilarious roast of Barack Obama's campaign,
and proceeded to introduce Senator Obama.

He said:

“We all know this comedy debut is really the final test of the campaign,
so it would be unfair to put my opponent on the spot,
by setting unreasonably high expectations.

But I feel I should warn you
that you are about to witness
the funniest performance in the 63 year history of this event.

Now let's not add to the mounting pressure on my opponent,
but I want you to prepare yourself for nonstop hilarity,
the funniest 15 minutes of your life or any other.

Anything short of that will certainly mar the evening,
insult our host
and perhaps even cost him several swing states.

Senator Obama, the microphone is all yours.”

And the setup worked;
even though Obama performed respectably well,
he was comparatively stiff and not nearly as funny as McCain.

Well, it's hard to imagine an opening act setting the expectations any higher
than John the Baptist did for Jesus.

He proclaimed,

*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;
I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

But in John the Baptist's case,
he believed every word of what he said about Jesus.
Jesus was and is *The One*,
The Messiah,
The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The people were primed and ready for the power and Spirit of the Messiah:
I have baptized you with water, John said,
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

John's baptism was a sign of the person's repentance;
it was the ritual act signifying
that a person had turned away from sin and toward God,
They had restored their life to righteousness.
Having met the demands of righteousness
and having achieved this renewed moral state,
the person was then able to be forgiven of his or her sins,
and baptism was a sign of that cleansing,
and the return to purity:
a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But John portrays Jesus as offering a baptism *with the Holy Spirit*.

Jesus' baptism of the Spirit is not a sign of what a person has done
to make their life right in the eyes of God;
rather, it is a sign of what only God can do for a person,
namely, to cleanse them, body and soul, of all unrighteousness.
This is why Jesus is the featured performer:
he does what only God can do.

So why were the people flocking to John for the baptism of repentance?
Was it a moral and spiritual awakening for their personal sins?
Perhaps, but more than that
they came because John was offering Israel a way of return to its former glory.

As we heard from the prophet Isaiah,
the people believed they were living under the oppression of the Roman Empire
because of their sins,
because they had wandered from God's way.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double
for all her sins.

If all Israel would undergo the baptism of repentance by John,
then perhaps the Lord would relent from this Roman punishment
and they would hear the good news that the Messiah is coming to restore Israel
*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together...*
That is, Israel's Lord, and not the gods of those Romans.

But John's grand prophecies,
and the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament prophets,
did not fully prepare the people for Jesus.

They even misled John the Baptist himself.

The One who brings life and truth and grace into the world,
was and is powerful, to be sure,
and more powerful than John the Baptist
or any other saint before or after John, for that matter.

But Jesus' power came to us in an unexpected way...
in a displaced Jewish family,
a child born in humble Bethlehem to peasant parents,
amidst the smells and sounds and textures of a stable.

The messianic watchers were looking for a king
who would bring great military victories,
who would take no prisoners,
who would rule with righteous recompense,
and bring honor to the people;
but instead, when God's power comes
it is a voice crying out in the wilderness,
weeping for the condition of humanity,
bleeding and dying on a cross,
appearing to all the world to be overcome by the power of empire.

John would soon be sitting in prison and asking,
*Are you the One who is to come,
or should we wait for another?*

It turns out that even John had some repenting to do.
He had to turn away from his own set of expectations about the Messiah,
and become teachable and open to a new understanding
of the way God works in the world.

So for us, baptism is an opening act.

In the baptism Jesus offers — the baptism of the Holy Spirit —
we are opened to a new way of seeing ourselves and our world,
and so opened to a new way of life:

a life no longer burdened with failed attempts at perfection,
a life no longer bound by the chains of guilt and shame,
a life that neither wallows in self-loathing
nor in constant blaming of others for our problems.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

is a total immersion in the grace of God —
as we say, a visible sign of an invisible grace,
and as the opening act, it is the first of many visible signs.

So, when John says, “Heeeeere’s Jesus,”
where do we look today for those signs today?
Where do we see the Messiah?

Is he among those who enjoy the power and wealth of empire,
sitting in the halls of power and in the penthouses of high towers?
Or is he among those who are oppressed and ignored by empire
as he was when John introduced him?

Is he perhaps among...
the Rohingya refugees, fleeing ethnic cleansing in Myanmar?
Or Syrian refugees, ravaged by civil war?
Or the illegal aliens who reside in our own communities?

Or is he sitting and listening to the anguish of a woman
who is reeling and confused and afraid
after being groped by a man
who has the power to have her fired.

Or is he sitting with the widows and widowers this Christmas
who spend much of their time alone, remembering days gone by.

Or walking along the healthcare units of nursing homes,
and the cancer wings of hospitals.

The power and Spirit of Messiah are known in all these places.
And it is our calling, like John, to make him known.

It is important to note that John's preaching is drawn
not only from the words of comfort that we have read from Isaiah today;
but also from the words of reprimand in Malachi,
God's messenger who called the people to repentance.

We who want God to come to our aid
must first examine our own lives
to see what may need to be rooted out.

"Against our human tendency to read the Bible in self-justifying ways,
confirming our prejudices and excusing our resentments,
we must learn to read self-critically,
allowing Scripture to correct us.

As...Karl Barth says, "only when the Bible grasps at us,"
does it become for us the Word of God.¹

It's a good thing the One who is coming is more powerful than John,
and more powerful than any of us,
and more powerful than any person or nation or organization on earth.
The world is desperately in need of a savior
who can do what we,
in our utter brokenness,
cannot do for ourselves,
one who will call us beyond ourselves
to become what only the Holy Spirit can make us.

So today, in this season of Advent,
hear the call of your own baptism,
your own opening act,
and in your own life,
prepare the way of the Lord ...

...to come into our world,
into our nation
into our places of work,
into our families,
into our hearts...

to open us
to all that God would do with us.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

¹ Christopher R. Hutson, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 48.