

## WWJ[B]D

John 1:29-42

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Epiphany

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West Union, IA

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### Gospel Reading

Our gospel reading this morning is John, chapter 1, verses 29 through 42. If you remember, two weeks ago we heard the prologue to John, and learned that it was not about the birth of Jesus, but told us who the child was: the Word of God made flesh that "moved into the neighborhood." At least that is how *The Message* relates the Greek. This morning we pick up the story about John the Baptist when he tells what he saw when Jesus was baptized, and what it means that Jesus is the Son of God.

Our reading happens on two separate days. The first day John is speaking about Jesus, his baptism, and what God told John. On the second day, John points out Jesus to his disciples, then the action switches to Jesus interacting with two of John's disciples. Listen now to our reading from John Chapter 1:

<sup>29</sup> The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

<sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'

<sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

<sup>32</sup> And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

<sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

<sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

<sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

<sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

<sup>38</sup> When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

<sup>39</sup> He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

<sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

<sup>41</sup> He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).

<sup>42</sup> He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Sermon

It was in the latter part of the 1990s. I was still working as an engineer in Tulsa, when one of my fellow engineers had on one of those colorful rubber bracelets. Maybe you know the kind, that have a slogan on them promoting a cause or an inspirational message. I asked what it meant and got the following explanation: "It says WWJD, which stands for "What Would Jesus Do?" When you are faced with a decision, it reminds you to ask yourself, "what would Jesus do?" before making up your mind. Then you should act with the answer in mind." Then he said, "Since you asked about it, I am supposed to give it to you. Then you wear it until someone asks you about it." And that, my friends, is how I got a WWJD bracelet.

I don't remember how long I wore it, but I do remember how relieved I was when someone asked me about the bracelet, and I got to pass it along. At the time, I was working about twenty miles from home. Most of my commute was on probably the busiest highway in Tulsa, then three or four miles of stop and go traffic through a half a dozen stop lights. Drivers speeding along, changing lanes, and trying to get any advantage during the hectic rush-hour traffic. One day, while I was wearing the WWJD bracelet it occurred to me that Jesus would probably be more forgiving and grace filled than I was being during an especially congested drive, and my attitude changed accordingly. I wish I could relate a more profound or socially significant story but that's all I remember.

The WWJD bracelet movement was started in the mid-1990s by a youth pastor as a way to get her youth to think about the life and example of Jesus. But, the question "What would Jesus do?" goes back much further, at least 100 years. In the middle of the Jesus Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a pastor named Charles Sheldon in Topeka, Kansas wrote a book called "In His Steps." In the book, a fictional pastor of influential First Church asks members of his congregation to pledge to live one year asking the question, "what would Jesus do?" each time they had a big decision to make. The story chronicles several members of the church as they answer the challenge. Lives

are changed as they make decisions with the question in mind. The choices are not always easy, as you might guess. The novel is credited with inspiring the social gospel movement.

I think this is a flawed approach; for two reasons. First of all, Jesus did not encounter the same things that we do in our daily lives. Jesus was never stuck in the rush-hour traffic of a large city. Jesus did live in agrarian society, based on farming and animal herding. He told several parables about farmers and farming, but the message was usually something about God, or the kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry had a lot to do with healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and reaching out to the marginalized people of society, which is at the heart of the social gospel, which is why this WWJD is a big part of that movement. Outside of those areas it might be difficult to apply it.

Second, none of us are Jesus. We are not the Son of God. We are not, as John says, "The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." We are not the incarnational presence of God. Therefore, is it really possible for us to know the answer, and would it be within our ability to respond in the same way Jesus would? Jesus would reach out and touch a leper and send him on his way healed and cleansed. We cannot do that, but we can of course do our best. And of course, we should do what we can to consider how our actions might be influenced by the ministry and teaching of Jesus. I am not saying there is no value in WWJD, but just that it is not as easy and relevant to all situations as it might seem.

Besides, if we look at our reading for today. If we look particularly at the role of John in our story, I think what we need to do is ask the question: WWJBD, What would John the Baptist Do?

In the fourth gospel, John has a different role than in the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John, chapter 1, verses 6 through 8 says: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light."

In the fourth gospel, John does not preach repentance. Everything John does is to point toward Jesus; to testify to the coming of the Son of God. Which is exactly what John does in our reading today. John sees Jesus and says:

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

The whole purpose of John's activity has been to witness about Jesus, that Jesus might be revealed to Israel. Then John goes on to speak about the Spirit of God descending and remaining on Jesus, and that this was a sign that John was told to watch for, by, "the one who sent [John] to baptize with water." Finally, John says: "And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

On the second day, John again sees Jesus and, this time to two of his own disciples, says: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And that is where John's part of the story ends. John has fulfilled his role in the story; being a witness; pointing to Jesus; revealing the presence of Jesus in and to the world.

To some extent we have the same problem with WWJBD. We do not have Jesus walking around in human form, but we do have the Church, the body of Christ, working in the world. We can bring people to the church, or better yet we can take the church to them. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. But we are not the incarnation of God. Our role as the church is to bring attention to Jesus Christ; to preach to the world, in word and deed, that Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit is alive in the world. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, brings salvation to the world.

WWJBD, What would John the Baptist do?

Our answer is to say to the world: "Hey, look! See! God is alive. God is in our midst. The Holy Spirit is at work in us and through us and for us and even in spite of us! Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the World!"

Let us pray:

Lord, you sent John the Baptist, to testify to your light shining in the world. You gave the gospels to tell us the stories, and show us the wonders of your Son, and we, the members of his church, are called by you to show the world the same good news of salvation and forgiveness of sin. Give us strength to point to Jesus Christ. Guide us out into the world to show mercy, offer healing, and share your love to those in needs of your grace and peace. In the name of he who came as the true light.

AMEN.