

*“Storytellers”*

John 1:6-8, 19-23

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190698821>

In my favorite “Seinfeld” episode, George Costanza, Jerry Seinfeld’s hapless, corpulent and lazy friend, decides (once again!) to make a major life change. Instead of doing what he has always done (which has brought nothing but negative results), George decides to do the complete opposite of what he has always done.

Instead of tuna on toast, George decides to have chicken salad on untoasted rye bread with a cup of tea.

He decides to tell an attractive woman about his pathetic lifestyle and – Lo and behold! She finds it appealing and decides to go on a date with George!

He decides to stop shaving.

He decides to play it cool when he’s cut-off in traffic.

And in my favorite scene, he confronts and intimidates a group of hooligans disturbing the audience in a movie theater.

His date invites him to come upstairs to her apartment because after all it’s only 9:30. But instead of accepting the invitation, George refuses saying that they don’t know each other very well.

His date is impressed. “Who are you, George Costanza?” She says.

“I’m the opposite of every guy you’ve ever met.” Says George.

John the Baptist was asked the same question in the text that was read earlier.

“Who are you?”

Now, John the Baptist didn’t respond like George did; by saying, “I’m the complete opposite of every prophet you’ve ever met.” In fact he was quite similar to many of the prophets the Jewish people had met.

He looked a lot like Elijah, or at least the way they imagined Elijah looked like. He was out in the wilderness like Elijah and preached the same message as Elijah – a message filled with calls to repent and warnings about the consequences of repeated sin.

And they believed Elijah would come back and anoint the Messiah some day, so, they asked him, “Are you Elijah?” No I am not.

Of course, he could have said he was the son of Zechariah the priest and his wife, Elizabeth, drawing his identity from his parents or his ancestors. But he didn’t do that either

“Are you the prophet? Are you the one prophet who will come back and repeat everything that Moses did? Will you part the Red Sea, lead the people out of tyranny and to an era of freedom?”

No, he is not the unnamed prophet. No he is not “The One.” As much as they want to

find that prophet who will come before the leader that will lead them to an era of prosperity and salvation, John refuses to take on that identity.

This search for “The One” is the search, so many seem to be fixed upon as we enter the 2012 election season. Is President Obama the one that will bring us through these tough times? Or is it Mitt Romney? Is it Newt Gingrich? Herman Cain? Rick Perry? Michelle Bachmann? Rick Santorum?... Donald Trump?

Several months ago, TIME magazine ran an article on Ron Paul, who was running for president at the time. And the title of the article was “The Prophet.” You could almost hear the questions, “Are you the one? Are you The Great Prophet?”

We don’t ask the question explicitly, but sometimes I wonder – with all the expectations we place on one candidate – I wonder if we are essentially asking them, “Are you this great person we’ve been waiting for? Are you...The Messiah?”

Of course no one will admit their asking such a question. No one will admit that they look at our next president or our politicians as some sort of Messiah.

But talking about them sure gets us fired up and excited. The opinion of the direction of this country seems to be directly tied to the job approval ratings of our politicians.

Are we sure we aren’t looking for some kind of Messiah? Because it sure sounds like we are. We start sounding like a lot like the priests and religious teachers who came with

all their expectations asking John, “Who are you?”

“I’m not The Messiah,” John says. He’s quite emphatic about this. “I’m categorically not your savior. I’m not Elijah. I’m not the great prophet.... I’m... a voice.

Just a voice.

I’m a voice crying out in the wilderness.

And my message is meant to get people ready - “Get ready for the coming of the Lord.”

John knew his role; he knew his identity. John was the trailer and Jesus was the movie.

Does anyone else enjoy watching movie trailers as much as I do? I love watching movie trailers. I like getting to the theater early to watch all the previews. And I frequently visit Apple’s trailer website to see what’s “Coming Soon.”

I’m not sure why I love watching them. I guess I find them exciting. These are 2 minute mosaics of the best, most powerful, most visually stimulating scenes of the film to build anticipation and persuade you to spend the ten bucks to see the full feature.

Trailers, in essence, prepare the way; they tease you or tantalize you. And the best ones make you salivate. They intrigue you. The best trailers tell you just enough to make you turn to the person next to you and say, “I have got to see that!”

But a trailer shouldn't tell you too much either. It shouldn't tell you the whole story, because that's not the trailer's job.

You've seen those kinds of trailers before – you feel like you've seen so much that you don't need to see the movie. That's a “spoiler” not a “trailer.”

Of course the trailer isn't supposed to tell you too little either – those are called “teasers.” The only thing teasers do are make you want to watch the next trailer.

A good, true trailer speaks for the feature film – saying just enough but not too much, grabbing your attention but not arresting it or keeping it. It directs your attention elsewhere to the movie. It is, in essence, “the voice” – so to speak – for the main attraction. It's meant to prepare the way.

That's how John the Baptist saw himself.

He knew he wasn't the main attraction, he wasn't the spoiler and he wasn't the teaser either. But he was the voice – the trailer for what was coming soon. He wasn't the Messiah; he was supposed to prepare the way for the Messiah. He knew who he wasn't, and so he had a pretty good idea of who he was.

But John wasn't just a voice either.

At the beginning of the Gospel of John, the writer says that John the Baptist was also a witness. A storyteller. A person who verifies facts and say what they saw or experienced.

He was supposed to be a storyteller;

a storyteller about light - THE Light

The light that would “enlighten everyone.”

The enlightening light that was coming to the world.

I'm a little nervous this morning as I stand before you this morning because my Chicago Bears, #1 they're playing without their star quarterback and tailback, #2 they're in a tie with The Detroit Lions for a playoff spot, and #3 they are up against Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos.

If you haven't heard, Tim Tebow is The Broncos' tough, strong athletic quarterback who has a herky-jerky throwing motion and runs a college-style offense, choosing to run more than pass the ball. His play is often criticized but his record speaks for itself: he has 6 victories against only one loss (to the Detroit Lions) and the Broncos are pushing for the playoffs.

But what seems to get people really riled up is Tebow's faith which is front-and-center. You, see, Tim is an evangelical Christian who speaks about his faith boldly and preaches his conservative family values openly. He bows in prayer after each touchdown, writes biblical references on the black eye stickers under his eyes, and he claims God gives him the strength for each victory and each athletic success.

“I'm pressing on toward the upward call of Christ Jesus, seeking to continue living in the way that always brings glory to Him.” Tebow says in his book. “I hope it's on the football field, at least for now. But I know that (God) knows my platform and holds my future in His hands.”

Tim Tebow sees himself as a witness. He believes that the football field is a platform for him to talk about God and Christ's salvation. And many people are paying attention.

But I'm concerned that Tim Tebow and people like Tim Tebow see being a witness and "witnessing" as essentially telling people why they should believe in Jesus rather than telling people about Jesus and the difference Jesus makes.

Sometimes they come off like they are a witness on the stand, and the atheists and non-believers are the jury. They feel like it's their job to convince people that Jesus is who he said he was. So they're loud about it, they're defensive about Jesus, and make a case for why we should follow Jesus.

Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't be bold and courageous about talking about Jesus to other people. I am a strong believer in evangelism and sharing your faith. But, I believe in telling the story rather than presenting an argument.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Rwanda and Uganda. The experience was powerful. We saw deep poverty and mass graves where victims from the genocide were buried. We learned about words like, "colonialism," and how Western aid had sometimes done more harm than good.

After a week, we gathered together to talk about what we had learned. And a burly, bearded man from Australia who went by the name of Fuzz stood up and said that we need to be prepared for those who will ask

us about our travels to Rwanda. We need to be prepared with a story; a short and concise story that would last 20-30 seconds max.

And so we worked on our stories, not necessarily a story that told everything, but a story that would raise questions and invite conversation. And our stories had personal connections; they were concise and to-the-point.

It wasn't our job to be debaters or to convince people to believe in what we saw. It was our job to tell the story. We had been witnesses to the work of God in Rwanda, we had seen hope – overwhelming hope and had met people who had taught us a great deal. We were witnesses and now we had to tell our story.

And I'm wondering, you who have witnessed the light of Christ. How are you telling the story of Christ? Do you have a story?

That's a silly question. Of course you have a story. What is that story? How do you tell that story?

You don't have to know a lot of big fancy words or a lot of theology. You just need to know how Jesus has changed you and has affected your life.

Start with "Before...."

Before I knew about Jesus I felt aimless.  
Before I knew Jesus I thought life was all about me, or money, or power, or fame, or success.

Before I knew Jesus I felt deep fear, anxiety and darkness.

Then say, “Now...”

Now, I believe I am never alone. Now I know life about more than just me. Now I know that I am loved. Now I am part of a church family that loves me. Now my life is full of light.

Maybe you’re like me and you don’t have much of a “before.” So think of your storytelling like your talking about a relationship. Start with something like, “I can’t tell you why or how I fell in love with Jesus, but let me tell you when I think it happened.”

Many of you have a story about a spouse or a friend that has a pivotal moment or several pivotal moments, an experience or a period of time when the relationship changed.

When I talk about my relationship with Heather I talk about the first couple of months. I was living in Chicago and she was living in Pennsylvania.

I was tired of the long-distance relationship and felt like I wanted to call things off. So I drove to Pennsylvania for my college’s homecoming and went to see her to deliver the uncomfortable news.

But I couldn’t do it.

I felt like I needed to wait and see.

I couldn’t do it the next day either when we spent some time together at a beautiful park.

The third day was Sunday and I went to church with her family. And during the worship service, while we were praying, I

felt compelled to reach over and hold her hand and I felt *at that moment* that I needed to give this relationship my best effort.

So I did. Two years later we were married. There have been many significant moments in our relationship, but that was pivotal moment.

Now, if we can recount moments like that in relationships, why can’t we have those in faith? In our relationship with Jesus?

If we believe that Christianity is about having a relationship with Jesus, and if we believe that we are to be witnesses who tell the story of Christ’s love, let’s tell it like a relationship story, not as if it was a series of intellectual steps.

You are witnesses – all of you! You are prophets, witnesses and storytellers. Your lives are stories of God’s work in this world. Your lives are evidence of that God is with us – Emmanuel!

## LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, December 11, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: John 1:6-8, 19-23

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190698821>

**Sermon Title:** "Advent's Assignment"

**Sermon Question:** Who are you?

**Sermon Synopsis:** As we expect Christ's return, we are to be telling stories and bearing witness to the work of Christ.

**Featured Scripture Reflection:** "And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord' ', as the prophet Isaiah said.'" – **John 1:21-23** <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190698931>

**Opening Icebreaker:** Describe yourself in three or four words. How would your spouse or closest friends describe you?

### Scripture Questions

#### What is the scripture saying?

- Read **John 1:6-8, 19-23**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190698962> What stands out to you about this story? What questions does it raise? What does it tell you about John? What does it tell you about Jesus?
- Read **John 3:22-30**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190698993> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage add to your understanding of Jesus? Of John?
- Read **Luke 7:18-28**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=190699019> How does this passage compliment what was read in the previous passages?

#### How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me? (i.e. - How are these passages speaking to me?)

#### God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

#### A prayer

God as we wait for you to return and as we reflect upon your earthly birth, give us the courage to be faithful storytellers of your love for us and the world.

