

“The Same, But Different”
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Rev. Liz Miller
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Every day is a special day, but today is a very special day because today is my brother James' birthday. Two days ago I turned 31, and now it is James' turn. We share the unique distinction of being born two days apart. When James was born, he was adopted by a woman who, two years later, met and married my dad. A year after that, my dad officially adopted James himself, making him my adopted half brother and earning us the title of Most Confusing Family Connection Explanations Ever. When people used to ask my dad about his kids he would say, “I have a son who is 17 and a son and a daughter who are both 10.” They would innocently ask, ‘Oh, twins?’ “No,” he casually replied, “Different mothers.”

Even though James was adopted into our family, in what must have been an act of the Holy Spirit, we were born in the same town, in the same hospital, just 48 hours apart. When I was young I used to wonder if we were ever in the hospital nursery together—if there was a chance we were placed next to each other in the baby lineup, eyeing one another, with no idea that we would soon be brother and sister.

Growing up we had a unique relationship—not traditional siblings a year or two apart, but not really twins, especially because we lived separately. James lived with our dad and his mom in Kansas, and I lived with my mom in California. We spent our summers and winters together at our dad's house. I have always appreciated having someone in the world, my exact age, in my family, who was leading a parallel life somewhere else. We would compare stories on our schools, friends, activities, and experiences—even the different rules in each of our homes.

I have often looked at my life through the lens of my brother, so incredibly aware of the different paths we have taken and the different opportunities we have been given, all because he

happened to grow up in one place, with one set of parents, and I happened to grow up in another place, with another parent. I am cognizant that much of what has shaped us and made us who we each are today was largely out of our control and was a matter of circumstance.

For example, I am aware that I was a white girl born in a white family who primarily lived in a large, multi-racial and multi-ethnic city. I am aware that my brother was a black boy adopted into a white family and spent most of his life living in a teeny tiny, Midwestern town with no one who looked like him, surrounded white peers, some of whom had honestly never met a person of color before meeting my brother. I've seen the different experiences we have had because of what we looked like and where we grew up. Neither of us can control these parts that make up who we are and our history, but nevertheless they have molded us and defined us, keeping our stories intersected and intertwined, but different, widening our perspectives and changing the way we each look at the world.

I don't know why I was born me and James was born James, but I know that just as we all see the world differently because of who we are born as, my brother and I see the world differently because we knew each other.

I wanted to I tell you about my brother, not just because it is his birthday, but because I truly relate to the odd dynamic that must have existed between John the Baptist and his very close cousin Jesus: two miraculous births that were announced by an angel to two ecstatic mothers and two dumfounded fathers. They were born only months apart, in the same family, with two different lives ahead of them, but both of their lives belonged to God.

The stories of the cousins, John and Jesus, are intertwined with one another. Their lives were shaped by the life of the other—they are changed by having known each other. They were both prophetic voices, speaking a hard truth and heralding change. They both lived in the outskirts of society and clashed with authority and as such, their lives were both cut to short by betrayal and violence. The similarities and the relationship between John and Jesus connected their lives and their ministries, but even so, just as my brother and I had different experiences, John and Jesus were intertwined but had

separate voices, shaped by their own stories.

Just to clarify, in the analogy that I drew between me and my brother and the two holy cousins, I am not saying that one of us is John and the other is Jesus. I am definitely not saying one of us is like Jesus, partially because we would both make a lousy Jesus. James doesn't talk enough and I never know when to stop. I simply relate to two people leading such parallel, similar, but still different lives, but please know that neither of us is fit to be Jesus.

I would actually say that we are both much more qualified to be John. I think that is actually John's role in the Gospel, and in this Advent season—to remind us all what we are called to do. None of us is called to be Jesus—there is only one Messiah, one Son of God. But we can be John, the one who tells people that Jesus is on the way. I am reading a devotional called “All I Really Want: Readings for a Modern Christmas” and the author, Quinn Caldwell, explains this well when he wrote: Not everybody can be Jesus. But anybody can be John. Anybody can point to Jesus, tell the world that the dawn is on its way, get a glimpse of God on the road, and yell, 'Everybody! Look over there!’”¹

When questioned, John, “I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet...I am The Voice.” John was The Voice that cried out, telling everyone where he saw God entering into the world. John was The Voice that told passersby, “There is a new hope coming! There is a going to be a new day, and God will be with us once again!” John prepared the way for Jesus; reminding those around him that though he was not the one they were waiting for, that person would soon arrive.

Like John, in these days of Advent, these days of waiting, we are called to be The Voice. We are called to speak about the places where we have seen God enter into the world. Our voices are shaped by our unique experiences and the stories that we are longing to tell. I inspired by the voices of justice and courage that speak loudly and clearly, helping others understand the work of God, just as John did.

This week there are many voices that I am in awe of. I am in awe of our friends who traveled to

1. 1 Caldwell, Quinn G. (2014-10-07). All I Really Want: Readings for a Modern Christmas (Kindle Locations 231-233). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota this week. Their perspective has changed, having witnessed life on the res, and they have come back with stories of struggle and pain, but also stories of hope and love. I am also in awe, on this second anniversary of the tragedy at Sandy Hook, of the voices of parents and a community that has spoken out against gun violence and continue to work to bring about peace in our state so that no other child may be hurt.

Using your voice and speaking out in the way that John did and the way these voices of justice and peace have is difficult. It takes guts and gusto and not all of us are able to do it. Even those who can are only able to do so sometimes. Personally, I am struggling with my own voice. In the wake of the protests and demonstrations of the last few weeks—in the wake of Ferguson and New York and Cleveland, I have been struggling to find my voice. I'm stuck in a loop of anger and sadness. My anger and my pain do not come from reading articles or watching the news, although some of it does. My heartache around the racial tensions in this country come from what I have witnessed in my own family, from my brother's struggles and experiences, from the realities of racism that I learned as a little girl by listening to his stories, from watching his world unfold before him.

We are siblings born two days apart with completely different lives who learned about things like racism and white privilege before we had the words to describe them. I watched institutionalized racism play out when my brother, before we were old enough to have our driver's license, when he was struggling to be seen and heard and respected in a town of people who made it clear they wished he wasn't there, was made an example of by white prosecutors and a white judge. I have always wondered if his skin had been a different color, if his sentence would have been less than the maximum, if his mistake would have been a learning opportunity instead of a life changing moment. James is my brother, and I know that he has had experiences I will never have, and it makes me ache. It makes me feel called to finally raise my voice, because the struggle that is going on in our nation right now is so deeply personal. Instead of analyzing stories or having an intellectual discussion, it just makes me want to cry. All I am able to do is to follow in John's footsteps and to be The Voice. Tell our story. Name his

reality. And tell you that I want you to know my brother, because that is where I see God.

Three weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, I told you that I was going to have an Advent mascot this year, and that it was going to be John the Baptist. Well, this is what I've learned so far.

John was not the Son of God, but he was still a child of God. John was not the Savior of the World, but he prepared the world to receive its Savior. I've learned that Christ is the body, and John is the voice. As such, we are all called to be witnesses to the body of Christ. We are all called to be The Voice that heralds Christ's presence in our world and God's presence in our lives. We are called to work through the pain and the struggle and name our truths, so that others may in turn name their own truths. We are called to tell our stories and to tell the stories of our brothers and sisters. John said, "I am the voice. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." To you I say, find that voice within yourself. Be that voice. Do not be afraid.