

Hidden Figures: John the Baptist (Advent 1)
Matthew 3:1-12
December 1, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

You may have seen, or may remember a movie by the name of *Hidden Figures* from 2016. It followed a book by the same name, also published in 2016. I have read the book but not seen the movie. It traces the United States' race to be the first country to put a man on the moon. The public's focus was on the astronauts, as they were and continue to be the public face of NASA and the space program. *Hidden Figures* follows some people who were behind the scenes, three African-American women in particular, who were among the first women hired by NASA. They were called the computers, and they performed by hand, the complicated and complex calculations that allowed the Mercury and Apollo missions to reach appropriate orbits and then return the astronauts to earth. Your smartphone can probably do these same calculations now, but they had to be done by hand, without mistakes. These women faced hardships due to their gender and their race. Just as one example, when they arrived at NASA, there wasn't a restroom in their building that they were allowed to use. As a side note, one of the women, Katherine Johnson, is a Presbyterian elder, so obviously she was my favorite character in the book. These women, along with countless other people, were completely behind-the-scenes, doing crucial work. Without them, the moon landing could have been a disaster, or never even have happened. They didn't receive public recognition or credit for decades. They were hidden figures, hidden by circumstance and discrimination and to some extent, by their own preference.

Hidden Figures the movie and the book came to my mind when I was trying to figure out what to use as a sermon series for Advent. There are the stars of the Christmas story, the people and figures that we focus on frequently: Mary and the baby and the Angel Gabriel. I think the wise men get a lot of attention, since they have their own day on Epiphany Sunday, or Three Kings' Day. But there are other people, behind the scenes, doing crucial work, crucially faithful work, as they participate in the coming of the Christ child. I'm not going to go so far as to say Jesus couldn't have come, or wouldn't have been born, without these hidden Advent figures, because I'm not going to limit God's abilities, but as we have the Christmas stories in the Gospels, these figures are a little in the background but nevertheless important to the story.

We'll stick with Matthew's Gospel for most of Advent—it is the lectionary Gospel for this year, which begins today. Next week, we'll look at a passage that most of us skip right by, the genealogy of Jesus. The week after that, Joseph. And the final week, we'll duck back to Luke for a look at the shepherds, who seem to get overshadowed. But for today, we'll start with John the Baptist, who is both a strange figure in and of himself, and a strange character to put in the Christmas story. If we were following the lectionary during Advent, John the Baptist appears every year, so he's not completely hidden.

John the Baptist appears in the lectionary during Advent, and appears in our Hidden Figures series, because he is the one who prepares the way for Jesus. There are lots of opinions and speculations about how closely John's ministry was related to Jesus's ministry, and you can even see that within the Gospels themselves. Luke has the two men being cousins, though the other gospels don't mention any family relationship. When Jesus is baptized, John's role is either highlighted or downplayed. Reading between the lines, it seems like that John's ministry may have been just as popular in terms of numbers of followers, as Jesus's ministry, at least for a little while. It's hard to know, of course. I think we can conclude that John's message and ministry was powerful, and John himself played a crucial role toward preparing those who received his message, to receive Jesus's message as well.

I said John was a strange character to put in the Advent story, and I also said John was just a strange character. Matthew tells us he wore camel skin and ate locusts and wild honey. He was a man of

the earth, and he chose to live his ministry life in the wilderness. Rather than being in the middle of the action at the Temple in Jerusalem, or even in the small towns of Galilee, John was out in the wilderness on purpose, at a distance from the powers that ruled. If a person was trying to get their message out in public quickly, they would have done exactly the opposite of what John did. But even though John seemed to move away from power and popularity, the people followed him out to the wilderness. Matthew says people came from Jerusalem and Judea and all along the Jordan River to listen to John and be baptized by him.

What exactly made John's ministry so attractive, so interesting that people were willing to travel out into the wilderness to hear him? Well, that's another strange thing. The content of John's preaching, according to all of the Gospels, is one thing: Repent! Repent! Repent! John's message is concise and clear, which makes for a good sermon. He tells people they need to repent, and baptizes them as they confess their sins.

Even the Saducees and Pharisees, religiously observant and pious people, connected to the Temple, educated and powerful people, come out to the wilderness to hear what John has to say. John has exactly the same thing to say to them as he did to everyone else: Repent, repent, repent. Their religious observances, their pious prayers and sacrifices, their position at the Temple, their education and their power, even their very identity as Jews, as children of Abraham, none of that gets them any special treatment or special dispensation from John. They need to repent just like everyone else. In fact, John gets more than a little testy with them, calling them a brood of vipers, which is not a compliment. Everybody needs to repent, nothing makes anyone any more holy than anyone else.

And John closes by pointing, always, to Jesus. He says, I'm baptizing you with water for repentance, but someone is coming after me, someone who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

You and I are no John the Baptist, but we do share a role with him: we, especially during Advent, are to prepare the way for Jesus to come. We are to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our own hearts, and we are to prepare the way for Jesus to come into the hearts of those we meet. We can't force that to happen, but we can prepare the way. John seemed to gain some success with his consistent "repent, repent, repent," though I myself doubt that would be very effective, for us to walk around calling out "repent, repent, repent!" all the time. I'm willing to be wrong on that. And at the same time, John's message was more than what he said.

John went out to the wilderness. He shunned and gave no credence or credit to the centers of power and authority. He went outside the institutions and structures to preach his message of repentance and preparation. Where would the wilderness be for us? Maybe a housing project, a prison, a nursing home...those are just some ideas. Away from where the powerful people are. Away from where we'll get credit or recognition or reward. That's the wilderness. And John went there, on purpose, to prepare the way.

John didn't play favorites. He didn't give the important people any special treatment. He didn't let people claim credentials to let them weasel out of the hard work of repentance. On the other hand, he didn't make the not-so-powerful or the poor or the outcasts do anything extra. He held everybody to the same standard. Everybody needs to repent. Everybody needs forgiveness. His message of repentance was all the more powerful because of the way he applied it: to everyone. We may try to treat everyone the same, but our unconscious prejudices trip us up all the time. John the Baptist is a worthy role model as we strive to treat everyone equally, all the time, in all matters.

And John always prepared the way for Jesus, always was humble as he pointed to Jesus, didn't let his own ego get in the way of his message. He was a hidden figure, constantly scooting behind Jesus, so to speak, so that Jesus's ministry would have a strong foundation and a receptive audience.

John's method was consistent with his message, and his message was consistent with Jesus's message. He is a hidden figure of the Christmas story, and as we prepare the way for Jesus this Advent,

John is a hidden figure to admire and imitate, so that our methods and messages will also point the way to Christ.