

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 31, 2010 (St. John the Evangelist)

The Episcopal Parish of St. John the Evangelist. That's quite a mouthful. It's tough to fit all that onto bulletins and signs and, as I discovered recently, business cards. It would be a lot easier if we just called ourselves St. John's and left it at that. But unfortunately that wouldn't convey the fullness of our identity. We were named not for St. John the Baptist or St. John Chrysostom or St. John of the Cross but for St. John *the Evangelist*. And this is important both to remember and to celebrate on this the day of our patronal feast.

Now, I'm not sure precisely how the founders of this parish came up with the name or whether it was controversial but I do know that in good Massachusetts fashion it was put to a vote. I looked this up in the parish history this week and here's how it was tallied: St. John the Evangelist received 17 votes, St. Thomas six votes, and St. Margaret four votes. And thus the new parish in Hingham was dedicated to the author of the fourth gospel.

People are often scared off by the word "Evangelist." It's a bit too close to the word "televangelist." And worship around here would be quite different if we called ourselves the Episcopal Parish of St. John the Televangelist. I'd have to get some shiny suits and a bouffant.

But the word "evangelist" simply means one who tells the good news. In this case the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So it's nothing to be afraid of. And when John took up his pen and wrote what would become known as the gospel that bears his name he was telling the Good News. He was sharing the story of Jesus; the story of the Son of God; the story of our salvation. An evangelist is not a biographer; the role of the evangelist is to draw people into the story of faith. And with his gift for language and symbol John continues to do just that.

Without John we wouldn't have that soaring opening, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." We wouldn't have such phrases as "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" or "I am the way and the truth and the life" or "In my Father's house are many mansions." We wouldn't have the images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd or the Bread of Life or the True Vine. In other words, our collective story of faith would be that much poorer without the Gospel according to St. John.

But this also gets at the main reason churches exist: to help its members to share and live into the story of the Gospel of Christ. John highlights this in the opening lines of his first letter which we heard this morning. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." We *declare* to you what we have seen and heard and touched. It's about the shared story; we see it and hear it and touch it and we are transformed. When we engage it with all our senses we can't help but be drawn ever deeper into the story itself.

And much of what we do as Christians is simply to share the story of our faith. We pass it down to the younger generations through Sunday School; we read and comment on it every Sunday morning; we sing it and proclaim it; and we share it with those who have not yet heard it. To be an evangelist, then, is to be a story teller; a teller of sacred story. The stories of Scripture become interwoven into the very fabric of our lives. Our stories become wrapped up in the stories of the gospel. In time, as we mature as Christians, the story of faith becomes our very own story.

Which is why we need to hear them again and again and again. It's not as if we don't know the ending – I'm not giving anything away if I tell you that by the end of the gospel Jesus will die upon a cross and be raised up on the third day. You don't need a spoiler alert before I tell you that at the end of the story of the Prodigal Son, the father will welcome back his lost son with open arms or that Jesus will indeed be able to feed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and two fish. The stories never get old because we hear them differently at different moments of our lives; our perspective changes even as the story itself does not.

John the Evangelist challenges us with the question: How do you tell the good news in your own life? How do you tell the good news in word and deed? How are you an evangelist? Evangelism takes many forms. You don't need to go knocking on doors in your neighborhood; you don't need bad hair and a 900 number. It may simply be how you live out your life; how you treat people; how you share your resources with the less fortunate. But it must be intentional. There are no inadvertent evangelists; there are no accidental Christians.

Following this service we're holding our Annual Meeting in Upper Weld Hall and I hope you'll stay for it. It's another way that we tell our collective story. We gather to look back on the year that is past even as we look forward to what God might have in store for us in the year ahead. It's been an eventful year around here. To think that just one year ago the search process was in full swing, a deficit budget was presented, and while there was great hope there was also great uncertainty. Today there is a rector in place, a balanced budget will be presented, and there is great hope and anticipation about the future.

And this is why it's especially fitting to commemorate our patron this morning. Because as with St. John the Evangelist, everything gets back to the telling and sharing of our story. When we boldly tell the story through our worship and ministry we will grow both numerically and, more importantly, spiritually. Later this morning we'll talk about some of the steps that will take us there. But it all begins and ends with the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There's a well-known protestant hymn called "I love to tell the story." I won't sing it because, frankly, I really can't stand it. But if we all embrace that; if we all start telling the story of Jesus and St. John's with passion and clarity; if we all start living out the story of faith in our lives with intentionality; there's no telling what God has in store for us. But I do know this: it will be infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.