

Standing Out of the Spot Light
Martha Sterns Marshall Day of Preaching
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I spent my last semester of college student teaching in South Africa. Throughout my stay, I'd done quite a bit of traveling around the country, often on my own, and often on whim, but during one particular school holiday, I decided to venture out of the country to Zimbabwe to see Victoria Falls – the world's most expansive waterfall at just over one mile long. Filled with great enthusiasm about the adventure ahead, I packed my bags, took a cab to the airport, and flew to the falls. I had no hotel reservations, no definite plans for once I arrived, no travel companion, no local currency, no language proficiency, no clue really. I got off the plane, gathered my bags, some brochures on local tours and looked for a cab. I came upon a friendly, English proficient driver who took me to a local hotel on the Zambezi River and even assisted me in negotiating a local currency exchange. Once at my hotel I had planned to call and let my family in the US and my friends in South Africa know where I was and when I'd be back, but in all the excitement I forgot. I immediately ventured off on a mid-day jungle safari from the vantage point of the back of an African elephant. Then I hopped onto a sunset river boat cruise down the Zambezi. We saw hippos and crocodiles just feet away. Hours after my arrival, I had dinner at the hotel and made my plans for the next day's tour to the Falls.

When I finally thought about calling home, the hotel where I was staying had no capacity for making calls outside of the country, so I was unable to let anyone, anywhere, who knew me from anybody know my whereabouts. It was in that moment that I realized I'd done a dumb thing. How could I have been so wrapped up in myself and my experience and the excitement around me, the plans that I'd made, the tasks I wanted to do, and the business of my day that I had overlooked any plan to let someone know where I was, what I was doing, or where to look for me if something went wrong? How could I have wound up alone in a foreign country without a sole knowing where I was? How was it possible - The very same way that you and I can live from day to day, in our own experiences, in our own lives, wrapped up in our busyness and in our plans, and forget to recognize God's total centrality to it all.

If you don't believe me – think about how minutes, hours, and even days have gone by when you have failed to stop and think about God as the center of everything that is and everything that we do.

Our culture tells us it's all about me! Look out for #1! Be the best, gain the most, win the biggest prize! Everything in our culture today screams, "Fame, power and success are what matter most." And yet, today let's look at the message that God gives us – that life is not all about us but it is about pointing the world to the one who created it all and giving all the glory to the one it truly belongs.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to John 1:1-9. The writer John was very intentional in beginning the book of John to be sure we as the reader recognize the parallel between this beginning and the beginning in Genesis we heard earlier. John wants the reader to know that the Word, Jesus, was there in the very beginning, but was made flesh in this beginning.

Let's read in John 1:1-9 – *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. 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. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

"In the beginning was the Word." And as we heard earlier from Genesis, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* Think back to the very beginning – before the start of the world - before history, before life, before time – what’s going on there? Who is there? God is there. God and void. God, void and the Word – Jesus. And then God breathes, and all of life comes into being. Life begins because God spoke it into being. And nothing was possible without God and without the Word – and everything came into existence simply because of God. There wasn’t anything else that caused it all or started it all, or that had that kind of control over it all. That’s centrality. Even the wording that uses God’s name over and over depicts God as the central character. God is the center of the story, and God has been the central character of all history since before the beginning.

Think about an elementary school play for a few moments. Mrs. Smith announces to her class that they will be performing a play entitled, “The Story of Life.” Auditions will be held next week. All of the kids begin memorizing lines and rehearsing parts. They practice in hopes of getting the big part. Finally, audition day arrives and the boys and girls are so nervous. They give it their best and then anxiously await the announcement of the cast. Everyone wants the lead as that is the part that will get the highest acclaim. The lead will be the one standing in the spotlight at the end of the performance. The lead will get his or her own bow and their own round of applause. The supporting cast is important, but not nearly as important as the lead. All eyes will follow the lead from one place to another. They will get all of the praise. Then the teacher moves to the front to announce who will play each role, but in this play, as the parts are assigned, no one gets the lead. Everyone has been given supporting roles!

The students look around the room and start to whisper to one another – “Who is going to play the lead?” “Who will be in the spotlight?” “Who is all that clapping going to be for?” The answer – God. In this play they’ve gotten right. This is “The Story of Life” after all. The Creator of all that is is going to be the center of the story. The actors and actresses, the supporting cast, will be telling the story in order to shed light on the source of Light itself. While it is just a play, this elementary classroom has put their focus, their aim, on the greatest goal possible – giving the glory to someone else – to God.

In our scripture we see someone else who had figured out his part in this story of life. We are introduced to John. Now John was a preacher who had started to have quite a following. John was preaching and baptizing. John, who later came to be known as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist, was having such success in gathering followers that the Jews sent chief leaders – priests and Levites – over to see what this John guy was all about. When they came to him and asked, “Who are you?” John said, “I am not the Messiah.” They asked again, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He answered, “I am not.” They asked, “Are you the prophet?” He answered again, “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?”

John, who knew his role in life, told them he was the one who was preparing the way for the Messiah. He wasn’t Jesus’ rival or competition. He was his support staff, his back-up crew, the set manager – just setting the stage preparing the way for the lead to come in and take over. John knew that his job was to be a “witness to the light.” “He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” He recognized his supporting role and made the most of it. He in no way took credit for what was going on but immediately pointed out his supporting role.

Now John had plenty of reason to feel worthy to take some of the credit. He had been chosen by God to preach, teach and baptize. Not many could say that. He had been chosen for the role. He had baptized many and had gained the attention of even the greatest religious leaders in town. He was in fact the founder of the very FIRST Baptist Church, and his church was growing by leaps and bounds. He'd started the newest trend. You'd think that John would want his moment in the spotlight. Even the most humble want their moment right? So he pointed all the attention to Jesus on the first day, but what about day two? Surely by day two, John would want some of the attention for himself.

Well on day two, we read continuing in John 1 that John saw Jesus coming toward him, and he declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the one I was talking about! Here is the Son of God."

And on day three - John saw Jesus again, this time two of John's disciples were with him and John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And the two disciples left John and went to follow Jesus. Now if that wasn't reason for John to get mad - here were two of his closest friends, his students, his team, his partners, and they just up and left him for Jesus - but John wasn't upset. John wanted all to see the Light - to know the true Messiah - to know the one who's sandals John wasn't even worthy to untie. John had it all figured out. John knew he was in the supporting role, and he has a legacy because of it. Not because of what he did, but because he was continually pointing to God - to the light. As a result, his life mattered. His efforts were lasting and significant.

In our story of life, the story in which we've all been cast, we're in supporting roles too and God SHOULD BE the center of our story. We may try to get in the spotlight. So many things make us feel worthy of that spotlight - we make the best grade or move to the top of the class, or as we complete the project that lands a big raise and a promotion in the company, or as we raise the most money for the charitable project, or give the most time to the worthy cause. It can be easy to take the credit and to bask in the momentary praise, but in this story our role is to point to the lead. All eyes are to be focused on the Creator. It's our responsibility to make our role a part that counts. In the big picture of things we must always keep an awareness of our part of God's story fresh on our minds. Right now the lead is standing in center stage and all eyes are glued to the one who is getting the praise - who's standing in the spotlight of your story? Is it you or is it God?

I can't remember the first time I really considered how very finite and small I am, but now many things frequently spark such thoughts. Like the internet - although it connects us to countless people and endless information, it reminds me of how very little I can ever actually grasp in my lifetime. A world map - even if endless resources were at my disposal, I could never travel to and understand all of the unique places and cultures in our world. Science class - when I consider the perfect design of an ecosystem, or the grandiose scope of the solar system that can be measured only in light years, or when I ponder mysteries like miracles, conception and human development. All of those things remind me of how very small I am.

Have you ever thought about how small you really are? Just imagine for a moment the God's eye view of things. I kind of see it like one of those zoom out camera angles in a movie. Imagine yourself - one person, inside one church building, in one town, in one county, in one state, in one country, on one continent, that's part of one world that's part of one galaxy that is surrounded by billions of galaxies that are far more expansive than our own.

We have only one human lifetime to live – 25 years, 70 years or even 100, whereas millions of people have lived before us and God has reigned since before there was even a beginning of time. We can only know what we learn, or what we experience, yet God knows everything. Even if you are the world's most social butterfly or hold the greatest position of influence and know more people than anyone else you now, our scope of influence is small.

We are SMALL. We are TINY even. In comparison to our God who is BIG – we are small. Think about God's greatness – God's expanse, God's reign, God's knowledge, God's authority, God's plans, God's eternal existence. God is big and we are small. God's omnipotence allows God to be in all places and to know all things and all people. God reigns over all and God is greater than our minds can even begin to imagine. God is everlasting. God's purposes will be fulfilled.

I don't mean to make you feel small, in fact just the opposite. When you consider that a God who is so incredibly great wants to have an intimate and personal relationship with each one of us, even though we are so incredibly small, that puts our lives into a new perspective. It gives us God worth instead of self-worth. No amount of self-worth can compare to the value God gives us. Embracing our smallness help us desire to live for God's purposes instead of our purposes. It is an invitation to be a part of something that is so much bigger and better than us. It is an invitation to be a part of a life that counts because we did something for the kingdom of God that will last eternally. It's a chance to make a lasting legacy. Now that's a life I'm excited about living.

We can get wrapped up in ourselves, just as I did on my Zimbabwe adventure. We can be busy, productive, successful, achieving, exceeding, gaining, producing, coping, developing and it all be for ourselves and it all not really matter once it's done. Or we can be loved, and cherished, and embraced, and redeemed, and humbled and given mercy and point all glory to the God who gives us everything anyway and it count for something that's worth it.

Have you thought about light lately? We generally just take light for granted. It's what comes on when we flip the switch. It what comes up each morning with the sun. God's light has been shining for as long as there has been – it will keep illuminating for all time and until all of God's purposes have been. When Jesus came into our world, when the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, he was the light that came to enlighten everyone. That light is ours to embrace. We can choose to accept Christ's light in order to share it with all the world. Like John, we ourselves aren't the light, but we can testify to the light.

We all have moments that take us away from following the light. They are times when we take the spotlight and push the leading character aside. There are times when the darkness creeps in and before we realize it, things are much darker than we remembered. But there is hope – we can always return to the source of the light and we can always redirect the beam.

What would it look like for us to be pointing the light in the right direction? We wouldn't just recognize how great God is, but we would live fully trusting God's plans, God's purposes, God's timing. We'd all be living out our lives as much like Jesus Christ as we possibly knew how. We'd be offering love and grace and mercy and hope to everyone we encounter – not just those who deserve it or to those we find worthy of it – but to everyone we encounter. We'd be working in the very places that God has called us to work to the very best of our ability – whether that be as a teacher, a mailman, a computer analyst, a nurse, a father, an artist or a student. We'd be excelling to our greatest potential in every area of life. We'd stop worrying and stop stressing out and stop working seven days a week because we'd recognize that without

time to rest and observe Sabbath to honor the Creator, everything we keep stressing to get done won't matter. We'd give generously, and embrace freely, and accept fully, and love unconditionally.

Why would we do it all? Because we would realize, like John, that we must decrease and He must increase.

When I got back to South Africa from my Zimbabwe adventure, I immediately called my parents to check in. They were happy to hear from me, as always, but they hadn't even known to worry. She didn't know I'd ventured off alone to some other country, or that no one had known where I'd been or when I'd be back.

Unlike my mom, God knows when we're wandering off, doing our own thing, not living for the purposes that matter. God is fully aware of when we get it and when we don't. And God knows, probably like my mom and dad did, that in spite of my best intentions, there would be times again, when I'd make choices that weren't the wisest. And despite our imperfections and smallness, God continually chooses to allow us to be a part of God's story. God continues to use humanity to point others to Him. God doesn't need us, yet God chooses to use us. God endures through all time, and exists in all places, and knows all things. God doesn't have to engage us, yet God desires for us to have a personal relationship with Him. Even though God is great and we are small, God loves us. That's amazing! That's worth living our lives to help others recognize. That's worth moving out of the spotlight and saying, "To God be the Glory!"