

## BEARING WITNESS OF THE LIGHT!

Advent 3 (11 December Anno Domini 2011)

Rev. Steven D. Spencer - Pastor Messiah Lutheran Church

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. . .

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to 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."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

It's good to know who you are, and it's also good to know who you are not. John the Baptizer knew who he was, and who he was not.

He wasn't the Messiah, the Christ. A committee of priests and scribes from the Religious headquarters in Jerusalem went out to investigate John. They always sent a committee. "**Who are you,**" they demanded to know of this odd man named John. Are you the Messiah? People had been watching and impatiently waiting for the Messiah. The Temple was nearly refinished, sacrifices were once again being offered. They were expecting the Messiah to come and dwell in His Temple. They thought the Messiah would be someone who would rally the troops, liberate Israel, and establish the throne of David. They were looking for superman, the Übermensch the mythical mighty man, the one who was going to act for truth, justice, and the Israelite way. A leader of holy war, perhaps this wilderness stranger was the one.

"No," John said. "I'm not the Christ." He is someone greater than I. John's cousin Jesus was on His way to the Jordan River to be revealed as the Anointed One. But John was clear; John wasn't the Messiah, the person everyone was waiting for.

"Are you Elijah," the committee asked. Malachi wrote some 450 years earlier that Elijah would appear before the day that the Lord appeared. Perhaps he was Elijah. He kind of looked like Elijah, with the camel's hair coat and all. And he appeared in the same wilderness that Elijah was in when he departed in a fiery chariot. So, maybe he was Elijah.

Jesus after all said John was. "**For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come**" (Matthew 11:13-14). But John wasn't willing to claim that for himself. That was for Jesus to say. John didn't seek celebrity status. His job was to point to Jesus and step out of the way. And so his answer was simple, "**No, I'm not Elijah.**"

“Are you the Prophet, then,” they persisted. If not the Christ or Elijah, maybe the Prophet of whom Moses spoke. That came from Deuteronomy 18:15. **“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him”** He surely fit the bill.

But again a simple and direct **“No.”**

“Who then tell who you are?” John refused to work in their categories. He gives them only what they need to know. **“I’m a voice calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”**

**They questioned him: “Why then are you baptizing? Who authorized you to do this if you aren’t the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”**

John never did answer that question. Instead John points out, **“I’m not worthy even to bend down and loosen the strap the sandal of the one who comes after me.”** It all happened in the obscure little town of Bethany. Not the one near Jerusalem, but the one in the wilderness, on the other side of the Jordan, far away from Jerusalem and its temple. That’s how God works; He’s hard to pin down according to human reasoning.

John was a witness. A witness tells what he saw and heard. He doesn’t talk about himself. If you are called as a witness in a trial, you aren’t called to talk about yourself; you are called to bear witness to the facts, what you saw and heard. Feelings don’t count when it comes to testimony. Not that feelings don’t matter, they’re just irrelevant unless you’re testifying about your feelings. You can say, “I’m happy, I’m sad, I’m joyful,” and no one can dispute that.

John’s witness was not to talk about how he felt about Jesus, or how close he felt to God. **“He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the Light.”** John didn’t seek the spotlight. He didn’t want to be center stage. I believe John was a man extremely uncomfortable with the public eye, and with all these questions. John probably wouldn’t care if you forgot his name. He wouldn’t be upset if you didn’t send him a greeting card. All John wanted to do was point his finger in the direction of Jesus and say, **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** Jesus had to increase; John wanted to decrease.

That’s very difficult for us to accept. It counters everything around us and inside of us. We live in a celebrity-driven culture. We elect action heroes as governors and B-film actors as president. To get elected these days, you have to look good on television or you don’t stand a chance. We define success in terms of the attention paid to us. Those Hollywood types may complain about the paparazzi, but let the flashes of cameras go away, and they’ll do anything for that fleeting 15 minutes of regained fame.

It’s in each of us, too. Our old Adam and Eve are very self-oriented, self-centered, self-absorbed. Children, even the littlest ones, show this inborn tendency. They are the center of the universe, and everyone is at their beck and call. Our desire to control each other is more of the same. Not only do I know what’s best for me, I know what’s best for you too. The sin of self-centeredness is like a virus that permeates our humanity. We want to be gods, and we don’t like having competition.

It infects our churches too. Celebrity pastors, mega-congregations. Look at me, look at us. Come to our church. I cringe when I hear people say “your church” or when they refer to this congregation as “Pastor Spencer’s congregation.” There were six other pastors here before me, and it wasn’t their congregation either. It’s the Lord’s church – His Word, His Baptism, His Body and Blood, His ministry, His people. It’s entirely the Lord’s. I just serve here.



The congregation at Corinth was infected with the celebrity virus. People would say, "I follow Paul" or "I follow Cephas" or "I follow Apollos" or "I follow Christ." And Paul says, ***"We're nothing but workmen, building on the foundation of Christ. You are God's field, God's building. We're nothing but carpenters and bricklayers and plumbers."*** He says, ***"So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is of God."*** (1 Cor. 3:21)

It's not being a faithful witness to say, "I've decided to follow Jesus and so should you." It's not a faithful witness even to say "Come to my church" or to say to an unbeliever "You need to go to church."

The apologist John Warwick Montgomery wrote a provoking little book intended to ruffle feathers entitled, Damned Through the Church. His point was that you don't invite people to go to church, as if going to church is the good work that will save them. You proclaim the saving person and work of Jesus Christ, how the Son of God became Man, suffered and died for the sin of the world and rose from the dead to save us. You share how He gives out the gifts of His death and resurrection to believers He's gathers us together for just that purpose. In other words, you don't point to yourself and your religiosity or to the preacher or to the programs or success of your religion. You point to Jesus Christ whose body is the church. You point to the Word of forgiveness, to Baptism and to the Lord's Supper the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

I wonder what John the Baptist would say if he walked in this morning and stood in this pulpit. I think he'd probably take note of our comfort, our complacency, our casualness. He'd certainly call us to repent and prepare the way of the Lord. He'd probably rebuke us for all the silly things that cause us distraction in church, all those things we think are so important but really aren't. He'd stare straight into our eyes and probably say, *"Forget about your felt needs, your feelings, your problems, your pities. Forget about yourself. Christ must increase; you must decrease. And that's going to be good for you, because in losing yourself you will find yourself in Christ, and in dying each day to sin, you will rise to new life in Jesus"*.

John might also point out how blessed you and I truly are. He never lived to see how it all came out – Jesus' death and resurrection. We know how it came out. We have the eyewitness testimony, the written deposition of the gospels. We have a Baptism greater than John's – of water, word and the Holy Spirit. Buried with Christ in His death; raised with Him in His resurrection. We have the Supper of Jesus' very Body and Blood.

John knew who he was, and who Christ is. He knew he was not the light; He knew Jesus was, and trusted Him. Jesus is your Light and your Life. Christ comes here and now to forgive you, He (†) is your Light in the darkness of sin and death. He is the light that darkness cannot overcome. He is your savior for in Him (†) all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And He comes soon to raise you and give you Life eternal in heaven.

Come Lord Jesus come, come quickly, In Jesus holy name, amen and amen.

*The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.*