

December 13, 2020
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Called to Witness”

“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.”

Two words that you never want to hear from your dentist are **root canal**, and unpleasant but often necessary dental procedure. For better or worse, I have heard these words three times, the latest shortly after I moved to Stratford. When my dentist uttered these two dreaded words, he informed me that he was referring me to an endodontist, *“a highly skilled dental specialist in diagnosing and treating tooth pain and performing root canal treatment.”* While I cannot say that I enjoyed my visit to this specialist, I am thankful for her skill in performing this procedure that saved my tooth and spared me from what could have been an excruciatingly painful infection. Sometimes, the best person for the job is a specialist, a person who focuses on one specific task. If we have heart trouble, it is best to be referred to a cardiologist; if we want to draw up a will, it is wise to seek out an attorney that specializes in estates and probate. As American citizens, Susan and I are required to file USA tax returns as well as Canadian returns, so we have an accountant who specializes in this area. While there are times and places for generalists and “jacks of all trades,” there are also occasions when it is best to go to someone who specializes in one specific task. In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist is presented as a specialist; he *“was a man from God [who] came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.”* (John 1:6-7). John is never identified as “the Baptist” in the Fourth Gospel, nor is he ever called the “forerunner of Jesus.” Instead, John has one function in this Gospel: *“He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”* (1:8). The term “witness” (*martyria*) or some form of it appears over fifty times in this Gospel; the word has both religious and judicial dimensions which both figure prominently in John. The appearance of John at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel presents him as the one who testifies or witnesses to the “light” which has come into being in the coming of the one who is *“the life [that] was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (1:4-5). The witness of John to the light is full of promise, because it contains the seeds of faith; he testifies *“so that all might believe through him.”* (1:7). The Gospel clearly states that John himself was not the light, removing any grounds for overvaluing the person of John by subordinating him to *“the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into*

the world.” (1:9). John is not presented as a messianic figure; his one specialty is to serve as a witness to the one who is to come.

- “The witness of John belongs to the story of Jesus. As the light enters the world, the focus shifts from the eternal Word to the historical. The transtemporal is wedded to concrete human experience through the person and witness of John.” – Gail O’Day.

John’s testimony will lead others to faith, but it will also be offered as evidence in a trial in which John is interrogated by representatives of the religious establishment who will oppose Jesus’ ministry in this Gospel: “*This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’*” (1:19). The question of identity is one that Jesus will confront throughout the Gospels; Matthew’s Gospel reports that “*when John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’*” (Matthew 11:2-3). The issue of John’s identity must be resolved before the central question of the Gospel – the identity of Jesus – can be addressed. John’s emphatically confesses that “*I am not the Messiah*” (1:20); his statement that “I am not” (*ego ouk eimi*) will later be contrasted by Jesus’ statements about who “I am” (*ego eimi*):

- “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” – 6:51.
- “I am the light of the world.” – 8:12.
- “I am the good shepherd.” – 10:11.
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” – 11:25.
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” – 14:6.

John also denies that he is Elijah, who was expected to return as a harbinger of the messianic age (“*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.*” – Malachi 4:5), nor is he “the prophet,” a figure mentioned in the Torah (“*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your people; you shall heed such a prophet.*” – Deuteronomy 18:15). John stands his ground amid this unrelenting interrogation, answering the authorities’ challenge to “*let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?*” (1:22) by identifying himself as “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*” (1:23; Isaiah 40:3).

- “Jesus’ witness *par excellence* declares that he *is not* the One – not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the Prophet. His testimony defers to the One who offers light and life: I am not the one you seek; He is coming after me and already is among you. John further distinguishes himself from Jesus as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, echoing the prophet Isaiah. God is the One who provides the way to salvation, and for John, Jesus is God’s agent of Israel’s salvation.” – Courtney V. Buggs.

John’s interrogation continues from those who “*had been sent from the Pharisees*” (1:24) who questions focus on John’s authority and his reasons for baptizing: “*why are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?*” (1:25). John’s answer shifts the focus away from his baptism to Jesus, “*the one who is coming after me*”:

- “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” – 1:26-27.

John emphasizes the secondary position of the one who witnesses in relation to the one witnessed; not even slaves at the time were required to undo their master’s sandals. John knows that his specialty, his calling, is to witness to the coming of the Messiah; the next day after this interrogation, “*he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ... And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.’*” (1:29, 34). On the following day, John is standing with two of his disciples, “*and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard this, and they followed Jesus.*” (1:36-37). John knows that he is not the one to gather followers, but to point those who gathered around him to the true Messiah, the fulfillment of the good news that in Jesus “*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (1:14).

- “I do not spurn John the Baptist; I honor and esteem him highly. But I must distinguish him and his ministry and life from Christ, to whom he bears witness. John is a servant and not the Lord himself. He points and leads to the true light, but is not the light itself. His ministry is greater and nobler than that of all the prophets, for he not only prophesies as they did that the Lord would come sooner or later. No, he points his finger at him who is already present and says, ‘Behold, this is he.’” – Martin Luther.

John knows that his specialty is to be a witness to Jesus, the one who is to come, the fulfillment of God's promises of the one who will come as the Redeemer of God's people. John rejects any other identity or task, and refuses to allow anyone to follow him, because he is a servant of the Lord and not the Lord himself. John fulfills God's calling for him to specialize in witnessing to the Messiah, preparing the way of the Lord; because of his focus on this one calling, our eyes are focused on the coming of Christ, the Light which is the life and hope for all people, so that *"every Christian rejoice in this birth of Christ, and glory in it, as if they too were born of Mary"* (Luther).

The specialized calling of John as a witness to the coming of Christ is the calling to which the Church of Jesus Christ is also called. The mission of those who have been gathered into the Body of Christ is also a specialized one: to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, to be a community whose mission is to *"proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9). The disciples who were invited to follow Jesus are commissioned by our Risen Lord to serve as his witnesses, to testify to the life-giving truth of the Gospel so that *"all who believe in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."* (John 3:16).

- "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." – Luke 24:46-48.
- "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." – Acts 1:8.

The Church of Jesus Christ that continues this apostolic ministry in every age is called to continue this specialized mission to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, to always center itself on proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, to shine the light of Christ before others *"so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16). As Lutheran Christians, we understand that in Holy Baptism Christ has called us into his Church which is *"the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel"* (Augsburg Confession). Our local expression of this church defines itself as *"a worshipping, learning, witnessing, and serving community of baptized persons among whom the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel ... [and] shall proclaim the Gospel by word and deed and thereby invite all people to repent and believe."*

(ELCIC Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations). The Church of Christ continues to confess in every age that *“we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729).

- “The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.” – Gordon MacDonald.

There are many tasks in which the church is engaged; but our primary mission is the specialty to which John was called, to which the apostles were commissioned, and to which the Church of Christ is entrusted in all generations: to share the gracious love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ. We are a people called to witness, to shine the light of Christ amid the darkness of our times, to proclaim to all people that the message the angels first shared with the shepherds is the *“good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”* (Luke 2:10-11).

- “John’s testimony of Jesus reverberates across time as we look forward in this Advent season. We are reminded to thoughtfully consider our testimonies of word and deed – do our lives witness to the light God within? In the midst of darkness, disappointments, and dreary outlooks, God sent Light into the world. Trying times have the possibility to yield tremendous testimonies. May God’s people ever bear witness that the Light is come and is now here. Thanks be to God.” – Courtney Buggs.

I cannot say that I enjoyed my experience with the endodontist, but I am thankful for her skills in specializing in the root canal procedure that saved my tooth. I am thankful to all specialists who devote themselves to a specific task in service to others. As we look forward to the coming of Christ in this Advent season, let us give thanks to those who followed in the footsteps of John in answering our Lord’s call to one specialized task: to witness to the light that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we continued in this specialized call, so that in the dark streets of our present age people may see shining *“the everlasting light”* and may know with assurance that in the birth of Christ in that little town of Bethlehem *“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

Amen.