

December 17, 2023  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent 3  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Can I Get a Witness?”

“He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

On one of our many trips out of town, we came upon a truck whose sole purpose was to bear a sign warning that there was a “wide load ahead.” Sure enough, behind this truck was a large flatbed trailer carrying the largest machine I have ever seen. I have no idea about its purpose; all I knew was that the machine was so large that it took up its entire lane as well as the lane in which I was traveling. If it had not been for the lead truck warning us of what was to come, we would not have been able to swerve onto the shoulder and avoid what would have been a very serious collision. As I continued driving, I thought of the many times that I have encountered similar warnings or announcements of something that is to come. Ever since I began using Google Calendar, I get regular notices on my phone and laptop reminding me of an important meeting. My chiropractor sends me “friendly reminders” of upcoming appointments, and my dentist is in the habit of texting me a few days before my next checkup and cleaning. Some announcements have more serious purposes; a tornado warning is something that must be heeded for one’s own safety, and certain physical symptoms can be warning signs of a far more serious illness. In many ways, these signs and warnings serve to get our attention so that we might focus on something that – literally or figuratively – is “coming down the road.”

In today’s Gospel lesson, we once again meet John the Baptist, a major figure in our Bible readings of Advent. John was introduced to us last Sunday as the “baptizer,” one who fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah of *“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* (Mark 1:2-3; Isaiah 40:3). John’s role in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is to call the people of Israel to repent and be baptized so that they might be prepared for the coming of the Messiah, the one who is far greater than John. In these three Gospels, John will be the one to baptize Jesus in the Jordan River as our Lord begins his ministry among God’s people.

John also plays a prominent role in the Fourth Gospel, but there are significant differences from the way he is portrayed by the other Evangelists. In the Gospel of John, he is never identified as “the Baptist,” nor is he called a forerunner of Jesus. Instead, the Fourth Gospel introduces John as the last and greatest of the prophets:

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”* (1:6). John has one function in this Gospel: *“He came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.”* (1:7). John appears here as a representative of all who “testify to the light,” the entire prophetic tradition; *“John completes the prophetic witness to the light so that the light might be made known to Israel”* (Curtis Martin and William Wright). John is not a messianic figure in the Fourth Gospel; his role is to be a “witness” (*martyria*), a term that appears over fifty times in this Gospel and is used by the Evangelist to refer to the character and significance of the one who this author identifies as *“the Word [that] became flesh and dwells among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (1:14). In the Christian context, to “witness” suggests not only personal, firsthand knowledge of the one for whom the person is witnessing, but also the willing to risk one’s all for the sake of this witness (the reason why the word *martyria* took on a new meaning as many witnesses – including John – were killed because of the message to which they were witnessing). His God-given mission “to testify to the light” was not well received by those who chose to dwell in darkness, and this Evangelist will warn later in his Gospel: *“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”* (3:19). The Gospel to which John served as a witness was not received as “good news” by all.

John’s witness continues as a delegation from Jerusalem arrives, sent to find out whether John is, or thinks he is, one of the end-time figures whom the Jews were expecting. John’s testimony will lead others to faith, but it is also offered here as evidence in a trial-like setting when the Evangelist reports that *“this is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’”* (1:19). John’s interrogators are a delegation sent by the official religious leaders of Judaism; in the Fourth Gospel, “the Jews” is a synonym for the Jewish religious establishment which is the source of most of the opposition to Jesus’ ministry in this Gospel. Their interrogation revolves around the question, *“Who are you?”* The issue of John’s identity must be resolved before the central question of this Gospel, Jesus’ identity, can be addressed. This episode also reveals that there was no uniform expectation for a messianic figure in Judaism at this time; the various titles in this section reflect the diversity of end-time expectations among the people of Israel.

Even though he was not challenged as to whether he was the messiah, John *“confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’”* (1:20). This is a pointed contrast to the language Jesus uses in this Gospel to speak of his identity: *“I am”* (*ego eimi*), as in his declaration that *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me”* (14:6). In his first response to

his interrogators, “*the rhetoric of John’s denial thus reinforces its content: he is not the Christ.*” (Gail O’Day). The delegation then asks John “*What then? Are you Elijah?*” (1:21). Elijah is the prophet who the Jewish people believed would return to save God’s people and punish the wicked (“*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.*” – Malachi 4:5). While Jesus speaks of John in Matthew’s Gospel of acting like Elijah, and the angel Gabriel speaks of him as acting in the spirit and power of this prophet, John denies that he is this great prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures.

- “He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also, the son of man is about to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.” – Matthew 17:11-13.
- “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” – Luke 1:17.

John also denies that he is “the prophet,” a figure spoken of in Deuteronomy (“*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.*” – Deuteronomy 18:15). Later in Mark’s Gospel, many people will think of Jesus in this role (“*But others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’*” – Mark 6:15). After denying that he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet, his frustrated interrogators ask John, “*Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?*” (1:22). His response is to point back to the prophecy of Isaiah: “*I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*” (1:23). John thus identifies himself as the voice who announces and gives witness to the coming of the Lord, the one who is “*the light for all people*” (1:5).

- “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 is already among you. John further distinguishes himself from Jesus as the voice of one crying in the wilderness ... God is the One who provides the way to salvation, and for John, Jesus is the agent of Israel’s salvation.” – Courtney V. Buggs.

The second stage of John's interrogation begins when the interrogators are identified as being "*sent from the Pharisees,*" (1:24), those who had opposed Jesus during his lifetime as well as the Johannine community to which this Gospel is addressed. These Pharisaic interrogators search for the basis of John's authority and the reason for his activity: "*Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?*" (1:25). Instead of answering their question directly and possibly falling into the trap they have set for him, John's answer shifts the focus away from baptism to Jesus: "*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 his secondary position as the one who witnesses in relation to the one witnessed, engaging in some exaggeration since not even slaves were required to undo their master's sandals. While the Fourth Gospel does not report on any of John's baptism, his ministry is mentioned as the Evangelist reports that "*this took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.*" (1:28).

The testimony of John in the Fourth Gospel is about who Jesus is, and this testimony is consistent with two important foci in this Gospel: Incarnation and Christology. John is the man sent by God to witness in history to Jesus, who was present with God in creation and who will be the eternal presence of God within history. John does not simply announce the coming of another prophet, but proclaimed the coming of the Word who would embody God's presence within the world. "*John is introduced as a witness (martyria), sent by God to testify to 'the Word made flesh.'*" (Gary W. Charles). While John proclaims that he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the Prophet, he declares that he has a prophetic role as "*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.*" John serves as the one who comes to witness and testify to the coming of the light, a calling he fulfills when he sees Jesus coming toward him the next day and continues his witness to the one who fulfills God's promises of the One Who is to Come:

- "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'" – 1:29-34.

On the following day, as John is standing with two of his disciples, he sees Jesus walking by and announces to them *“look, here is the Lamb of God.”* (1:36), at which point the two disciples (one of whom is later identified as Simon Peter) *“heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”* (1:37). John fulfills his role as the one whose call is to announce the coming of the Lord, who points beyond himself as a witness to the one who is the *“light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (1:5).

- “Even before John knew himself, God revealed Jesus. “Even I didn’t recognize him,” asserts John, but the One who sent me told me how to recognize him. John’s knowledge does not come from journeying with Jesus, as will his disciples; rather, God has revealed to John, ‘here is the Lamb of God.’” – Buggs.

John’s role as the one who testifies to the coming of the Light and points the way to the one who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world provides us with a role model for our role as God’s people in this time and place. As the risen Lord commissioned his disciples to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (1:8), the Church of Jesus Christ is called to point beyond itself as it serves as a witness to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the one who came to be the Redeemer of God’s people, the one who is *“fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also fully human, born of the virgin Mary, [and] is my Lord”* (*Small Catechism*). As in Holy Baptism we are called to *“let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16), we are called as God’s people to share the good news of the Light of Christ that continues to shine even in the darkness of our world; for *“though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet”* (ELW Hymn 824). As an assembly of God’s people who gather to hear God’s Word and go forth to share this good news with others, we *“have a responsibility both to be persons who reflect the light of Christ and to live in such a way that our lives proclaim the light of Christ in the world”* (Marcia Riggs).

- “Witness turns us to the Christ who is the focus of our worship and to the brothers and sisters who are the object of our witnessing. Truly evangelical Christians and evangelical churches keep pointing to Jesus, saying, ‘Here he is.’” – David Bartlett.

My thoughts keep going back to our encounter with the oversized load on the truck that was coming toward us on the highway and on the important role that the lead

truck played in alerting us to what was coming so that we might be prepared to get onto the shoulder and thereby avoid a terrible accident. The driver of the lead truck knew that the role of that truck was the point to what was coming; the lead truck was not the center of focus on the highway that day. In this season in which we prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord, our role as God's people is to emulate John, pointing beyond ourselves to the one who come as the Saviour of all nations, whose birth in Bethlehem offers the blessed hope that *"in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."* (ELW Hymn 279). May we shine the light of Christ before others as we witness to the one who is to come; let us prepare the way of the Lord!

Amen.