

Advent 3B 2014 Sermon

John 1:6-8,19-28

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.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "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?" 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, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "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." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Mark calls him "John the Baptizer"; Matthew calls him "John the Baptist"; Luke calls him "John, son of Zechariah". But in John's Gospel, he is simply "John", and he doesn't even give the religious authorities who come to question him **that** much information. No mention is made in this Gospel of John baptizing Jesus. For in this Gospel, John is not principally a baptizer, a prophet, an exhorter, or even a messenger from God. John is a *martyria*, the Biblical Greek word which means "witness". John is a witness, sent by God to testify to "the Word made flesh," to "the Light" that no darkness has or will ever extinguish. The principal vocation of John in this Gospel is to bear *witness*, a verb that occurs thirty-three times in this Gospel but only twice in all the other Gospels put together. (Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Word*)

And witnessing like John is something that any one of us here can do.

Professor David Lose notes that "John the Witness isn't just an example for preachers but also for *all* Christians. John... wasn't ordained. And yet in word and deed he pointed to Jesus in a way that we still remember and from which we might take both instruction and encouragement."

John the Witness is an example for us all, for we are all called to witness to the Christ. But what does that mean? And how do we do that?

Let's start by admitting that most of us aren't very good at witnessing to the Christ. But I don't think that this is because we don't have strong faith. I think that, at least in part, it is because we misconstrue what witnessing is. What do we think of when we imagine "witnessing to Christ"? Some of us may envision the street-corner evangelist preaching repentance, warning of sure damnation if

people do not confess Christ as their Lord and Savior. Others may think that in order to be a witness we have to have a lot of persuasive arguments to convince non-believers of the truth that God exists or that Jesus really was the Son of God. Some may think that in order to be a witness you have to know the Bible like the back of your hand, so that you can quote proof-texts from memory.

But if we look closely at today's Gospel, we see that John does none of this. In fact, as David Lose poignantly states, "John's testimony isn't actually all that articulate." I'd never thought of it in those terms, but he's absolutely right! Most of John's witness in this passage comprises statements about who *he*, John himself, is **not**. He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, he is not the prophet like Moses whose return had been prophesied. "[H]e will not even choose his own words," Barbara Brown Taylor notes. "Instead, he paraphrases the prophet Isaiah. 'I am the voice,' he says. He is neither the light nor the Word. He exists to testify to the one who **is** those things..."

"By the time John tells the authorities that they do not *know* this one, though he stands among them, and that John himself is not worthy to untie the thong of this one's sandals, the negatives in these thirteen verses reach a grand total of ten 'nots,' 'neithers,' and 'noes.' Here, then, is a stunning refusal to place the coming one into any of the theological boxes prepared for him..." (*Feasting on the Word*)

As we noted earlier, in this Gospel John is not principally a baptizer, a prophet, or an exhorter. He does not scold, or warn, or preach repentance. There is absolutely no moral or complex theological content to what he says in our passage today, and the only time he quotes Scripture is to say that he is the voice crying in the wilderness. In short, what John models for us in this passage is nothing that any one of us here couldn't do. In order to witness like John does, we don't need to have any finely honed arguments, or to be able to quote Scripture at will.

"Faith, by definition," writes Barbara Brown Taylor, "is radical trust in what God is doing, even when the divine mode of operation is far from clear. Even in the wilderness, even without a proper title for himself or a proper name for the coming One, John the Voice goes on testifying to the light... he survives on the bare minimum of certainty about what God has sent him to do. In the words of Meister Eckhart, God is found in the soul not by adding anything but by subtracting."

"[You] don't have to be eloquent," David Lose continues, "just honest. [You] don't need elaborate theological arguments – actually, [you're] probably better off without them! – but instead you need just to be willing to share with someone [you] care about a bit of the impact [your] faith or experience of congregation life or of Jesus has had on [you]."

Willing to share with someone you care about a bit of the impact your faith or experience of congregation life or of Jesus has had on you.

We can do this, my friends! We can witness to the light, just as John did! The only thing necessary, as Barbara Brown Taylor said, is faith, which I know you have! Faith, “trust in what God is doing, even when the divine mode of operation is far from clear.”

And it is important that we witness! Professor Lose, who has studied the changing dynamics of the Christian Church and 21st Century society, says “I am convinced that our churches will not grow until individual Christians can name and share why their faith is important to them with their friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. Not in a pushy, in-your-face kind of way, but rather in the same honest, even casual way we’d share other things that are important to us, whether it’s our support for our favorite sports team or political candidate or our views on some current issue.

“When I’m working with congregations,” Dr. Lose explains, “I try to save some time in which I ask people to turn to each other and share for just a moment or two why their congregation matters to them; why, in short, their faith is important to them... The first time I tried this was with a congregation in Colorado, and on the way out a man, probably in his middle eighties and stooped somewhat by age, stopped to speak with me. ‘I just want to say thank you,’ he began, ‘because I’ve been going to church with this gal,’ nodding to his wife who followed close behind, ‘for more than sixty years. And it turns out that *neither of us ever knew why the other was going [to church]!*’”

I don’t have to tell you that going to church is an increasingly rare habit in the world today. More and more, children are growing up never having darkened the door of a church, or having a clue about the Christian Faith. What if your grandchild, or the neighbor boy, asked you, “Why do you go to church?” or “Why do you believe in God?” Your answer might make a significant difference in that child’s attitude toward church or the Christian Faith. What would you say?

To give you an opportunity to practice, I’d like to ask you to take just a moment to do what David Lose does with congregations he works with. For just a moment, turn to someone near you and answer the question: “Why do you go to church?” Consider it practice for the day that your grandchild or the neighbor girl asks you that question. I will give you 60 seconds. Remember, John’s witness was not all that articulate, or theological, so yours needn’t be, either. Each of you has faith. Each of you has a reason for being here. Just share it.

It’s a start! Let’s keep up the conversation. As always, if some other thought comes to you during the week, please feel free to email me.

I cannot end without mentioning that there is another way, or another aspect, of witnessing, which doesn’t involve words. It is the witness of our lives. St. Francis purportedly said, “Preach the Gospel always; if necessary use words.”

Love expressed in action: caring for the sick, the outcast, the hungry. But love also radiating from the Light of the world shining within and through us. I believe that it was not just John's *words* that witnessed to the Light of the World, but that same Light **must** have shone in John, or his words would have fallen on deaf ears, and we would not still be reading about him 2000 later. A 10th Century Church Father (Simeon the New Theologian) put it this way: "When you light a flame from a flame, it is the same flame that you receive." John was not himself the Light, but the light within John was lit from that same Light to which he witnessed.

20th Century Anglican scholar and mystic Evelyn Underhill spoke of a certain "quality of our inner lives". "By [that]," she wrote, "...I mean ... the quality which makes contagious Christians, makes people *catch* the love of God from you." (*Concerning the Inner Life*, London: Methuen, 1927, p. 12)

In this dark season, may we be faithful witnesses to that Light. And may that light shining forth brightly from our hearts make us contagious Christians, infectious carriers of the love and good news of Christ.

AMEN