

Advent 3B 2017 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.

A college classmate of mine had an Irish Setter named Baron. It was fun to watch Baron in the fall when leaves were dropping from the trees. He would often think that the leaves – or the shadows that the leaves cast on the ground – were birds, and he would instinctively freeze, body stiff, tail straight out, and muzzle pointed directly at whatever leaf or shadow he thought looked like a bird.

Every time I read about John the Baptist as he is portrayed in John's Gospel, I think of Baron pointing. For that is John's role in this Gospel. As we just heard, "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." To point to the light.

As I read through today's Gospel lesson earlier this week, it struck me that there is something comical about this whole encounter of John with his inquisitors. These priests and Levites are sent by their higher-ups in Jerusalem to discover who this man is who is out in the wilderness baptizing. But in a scene worthy of Abbott and Costello, the question-and-answer exchange between John and these emissaries goes nowhere. "Who are you?" they ask John, and he replies, "I am **not** the Messiah." "But who **are** you?" they ask again. "Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" "No." These emissaries were sent on a mission to discover who John *is*, and all they are getting is who he is **not**! Frustrated, they plead with him, "Let us have an answer for those who sent us." The higher-ups in Jerusalem will not be pleased if they come back with only a list of what John is **not**.

And yet, John the Baptist wasn't trying to be difficult or evasive. John *himself* was on a mission: he was sent by God for the explicit purpose of pointing to someone *beyond* himself. Our Gospel tells us that John "himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." Fr. John Shea says that John the Baptist "is someone people [are to] go 'through' rather than 'arrive at.' What people are looking for is 'the light,'" which Fr. Shea says symbolizes "a full awareness of what is real, an illumination of the ultimate structures of human existence, a consciousness of God,

self, neighbor, and creation.”¹ These emissaries from Jerusalem – and those who sent them – should be focusing their attention on that *light*, **not** on John! For John is the proverbial “finger pointing to the moon;” he is not the moon itself. They should not be focusing their attention on the finger, but on the moon to which the finger points!

And yet, as Jesuit author William Johnston said, “...*without* that finger who will see the moon?” John is a pointer, a witness to the true light, and in the Gospel of John, “witnessing” is extremely important! In this Gospel, the verb *witness* occurs thirty-three times, while in all the other Gospels put together the word only occurs twice.² The last words the risen Christ says to his Apostles before he ascends into heaven are: “...you will be my witnesses...”³ Christ *wants* us to witness to him!

And, my friends, as Christians, *you* and *I* **are** witnesses to Christ! The only question is: Are we Christians good witnesses or bad witnesses?

This past Tuesday, the morning of the special senatorial election in Alabama, Mark Galli, Editor-in-Chief of the conservative evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, wrote, “No matter the outcome of today’s special election in Alabama..., there is already one loser: Christian faith. When it comes to either matters of life and death or personal commitments of the human heart, no one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation. Christianity’s integrity is severely tarnished.”⁴ According to Galli, fault lies with Christians on the left *and* on the right.

My friends, this is one of the reasons that church attendance throughout our nation is declining: Many of us Christians are witnessing, not to Christ, but to our own ideologies and biases; we are looking at our own fingers, not the moon. And those who *see* this – whether they be non-Christians or lapsed Christians, or whatever – are saying to themselves, “If *this* is what Christianity is about, I want no part of it.” And who can blame them? Who can blame them?

I find it hard to argue with Mark Galli’s statement that “Christianity’s integrity is severely tarnished” in the eyes of the world; but I **cannot** agree with his statement that “no one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation.” For I find true what is written earlier in this same chapter of John’s Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did *not* overcome it.”⁵ I see so many **faithful** witnesses to that light that shines in the darkness – faithful witnesses here in this parish, in our larger community and diocese, and in the world. I see so many faithful witnesses through whom the light and love of Christ shines, even in the *midst* of the darkness.

And in today’s Gospel, John the Baptist shows us that being witnesses to the light of Christ isn’t all that complicated or difficult! Professor David Lose points out that “John’s testimony isn’t actually all that articulate.” Witnessing to Christ’s light and love doesn’t have to be eloquent, it just has to be *honest*. Yes, there **are** many *negative* witnesses to Christianity in our world today, but we can turn that around by doing better, ourselves! As Richard Rohr says, “The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.” And more often than not, it is our loving *actions* and everyday kindnesses that speak louder than words. “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples,” Jesus says later in this Gospel.⁶

And in today's climate of widespread skepticism of Christianity, sometimes our best witness to Christ comes in the form of a simple invitation to others to experience life in the Body of Christ – in the Church – and to meet some of its members. Several of you are here today because one of your friends or acquaintances witnessed to you with a simple invitation to come to church – to “come and see;” just as, later in this chapter of John's Gospel, Andrew invites his brother Peter to meet Jesus,⁷ and Philip invites Nathaniel to “come and see.”⁸ And there is no better time of the year to do this kind of simple invitational witnessing than Christmas – by inviting a friend to Christmas worship. Just yesterday, someone who does not consider himself a Christian asked me, “Do you have a midnight service Christmas Eve?” For there is something about the mystery of Christmas which is deeply compelling – even to non-Christians! In the back of the church, there are some printed invitation cards which you can give to a friend when you invite them to come worship. But the best invitation is always, “Can I pick you up and bring you with me to Christmas Eve worship at my church?” In offering a simple invitation, you are showing to another person the importance of Christ in your life – you are witnessing to Christ.

Yes, Christianity's integrity, in the eyes of many in our country, has been severely tarnished. But that in no way lessens the longing in human hearts for that divine life and love “which is the light of all people,”⁹ – a longing which is felt so strongly during this cold, dark time of year. People are *yearning* for this light, for “a full awareness of what is real, an illumination of the ultimate structures of human existence, a consciousness of God, self, neighbor, and creation.” This Third Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist calls us to be, like him, faithful *witnesses* to this light. And so we pray, in the words of today's final hymn,

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness.
Shine in your church gathered today.¹⁰

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 29

² Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Word*

³ Acts 1:8

⁴ *Christianity Today*, Dec. 12, 2017 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/roy-moore-doug-jones-alabama-editorial.html>

⁵ John 1:5

⁶ John 13:35, NLT

⁷ John 1:40-42

⁸ John 1:45-47

⁹ John 1:4

¹⁰ “Christ, Be Our Light” by Bernadette Farrell, OneLicense.net # A-720388