

Testify to the Light

Third Sunday of Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Well, if I were you sitting out in the congregation today, and if I was here last Sunday, then I'd probably be thinking about now: What the heck, he preached on John the Baptist just a week ago, why's he doing it again today? Maybe I should just head to the Fellowship Hall right now.

So before any mass exodus, let me explain. First of all, it's the lectionary of assigned readings that is responsible for putting these two Gospel passages of John the Baptist back-to-back (last week from Mark, and this week from John). And to tell you the truth, until this year I have always ignored one of these two assigned reading because I also wondered why anyone would want to hear two sermons in a row on John the Baptist. Not only that, I couldn't think of any reason why I would want to preach two sermons in a row on John the Baptist.

But this year, the wisdom of why the lectionary put this pairing of passages back-to-back finally sunk in. And the answer has to do with the fact that **even though the main character of the story may be the same, the point that each gospel writer is trying to make is quite different.** So instead of getting a pairing of sermons that are overly redundant, we get a glimpse into the very minds of the authors of Mark and John, and why each one wrote what he wrote.

You may remember that in Mark's version of the John the Baptist story, which we looked at last Sunday, Mark emphasized John's connection with the Old Testament prophesy in Isaiah 40. Mark wanted his readers to focus on the prophetic role of John the Baptist, this rough guy who lives in the wilderness, eating locust and wild honey, preparing the way for Jesus through making the highway straight in every heart and mind. **The primary message of John the Baptist in Mark is a call to repentance.**

In contrast, the author of the Gospel of John gives a more philosophical treatise on John the Baptist. He inserts the story of John into his remarkably poetic description of Jesus that begins with the famous words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The author continues his description of what it means to call Jesus the Christ by explaining that Jesus is the light coming into the darkness, the Word of God made flesh. The author effectively and eloquently expresses the meaning of the messiah in ways to which the Greek philosophical mind can relate.

Rather than basically becoming the fulfillment of some Old Testament Hebrew prophesy, as is the function of John the Baptist in Mark, the author of John describes the role of **John the Baptist as the one who points the way to the true light – making sure to emphasize that he himself isn't the light.**

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist is not even called John the Baptist, but just John. Instead of telling us much about John's role as a prophet and baptizer, he is called a "witness," **a witness to the light.**

The Greek verb "to witness" occurs only once in Matthew, once in Luke, and no times in Mark. Yet this verb is used 31 times in John. **Bearing witness is a defining concept in this gospel.** Here's a literal reading of v. 7 then, "That one came as a witness so that he might witness concerning the light, so that all might believe through him."

In the Gospel of John, all the focus is on Jesus, and ultimately on God. The primary message of this gospel is that the light and life that is God's are now made accessible to us through this Jesus. In the context of this Season of Advent, we are pointed to this central focus, to look where John the Baptist is looking and to know the One whom Jesus has made known.

The primary challenge for us this day, then, is that we should take on the same attitude as John the Baptist. **He was the messenger, not the message. He was not the light, but pointed to the light.** Without trying to be too judgmental, I believe that there are preachers who tend to forget this – that they are only messengers. Some seem to focus all the attention on themselves, thus getting in the way of the true message – the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

Though the light of Christ does indeed dwell within each of us, the point in this gospel is that we ourselves are not the light, but we can point towards the light that enlightens us. And we can reflect that light through our thoughts, words, and actions.

Over 800 years ago, St. Francis of Assisi put it this way, "We are the moon reflecting the rays of the sun from our surface." In other words, **the moon is not a source of light, but rather a reflector of light. And the amount of light the moon reflects is in direct proportion to it being in the unblocked path of the sun.**

Perhaps we can apply this analogy to ourselves as individuals and as a congregation. The analogy goes something like this: The amount of light that shines as a reflection from us is in direct proportion to how open and unblocked we are from the true source of light, namely God – the God whom we understand as revealed through the life and ministry of Jesus.

So here's one of these tough questions that I like to throw out from time to time. **Are there any behaviors or attitudes in your life, or in the life of this congregation, that may be acting to block the direct light of God?** Using the moon analogy, is the amount of light that you and I reflect more like a full moon, or a half moon, or a small crescent moon, or heaven forbid, a lunar eclipse which is unable to reflect any light at all?

So just as that John came as a witness to testify to the light, we as Christians are also called to testify to the light and to reflect its brilliance.

Granted, as progressive Presbyterians the way we testify is quite different from our more evangelical brothers and sisters in the faith. I wonder how many hearts would completely stop if I were to call on one of you to come forward and “share your testimony”?

No, we tend to testify not primarily through our words but through our actions, and even through our attitudes. So the question in this case becomes: **Does what you and I believe, say, and do in our daily lives testify to the light?**

I want to change gears a bit and draw another analogy from John the Baptist’s understanding that he (and we) are not the light. In today’s passage, **John is confronted by the religious authorities and questioned about his identity and role. He is clear about who he is and his mission.** He states that he is not the Christ and he is not Elijah and he is not one of the prophets. Being clear about who he is and his mission also means that he is clear about who he is not, and what things will not contribute to his mission.

John has a healthy understanding of self. In a like fashion, a healthy congregation also has a good understanding of itself. Speaking as a Presbyterian pastor, I think that it’s appropriate to state, “We are not Southern Baptists. We are not Roman Catholics. We are not Pentecostals. We are not Unitarians (well, some might be). **We are Presbyterians.**”

And we can further define ourselves by the kind of Presbyterians we are, primarily a community of fairly open, inclusive, and progressive folks. **That is not to say that others not like us and this congregation are bad or even wrong, simply that we aren’t them, and they aren’t us.** The same can be applied within this very congregation. I am not you, and you are not me. We are all unique individuals with our own identity.

So in order to be a healthy congregation, then, it is extremely important that we know the answers to the following questions:

- **Who are we?**
- **Why are we doing what we are doing?**
- **Who is our target audience?**
- **What are our strategies for being a witness to our target audience?**

Identity. Identity. Identity. It cannot be overemphasized. John the Baptist was well aware of this.

John put himself in a position to be able to witness to and point to the light. **That should be our goal as well – to put ourselves in a position to witness to, to point to, and to reflect the light of God’s love and justice and peace and compassion** – a love and justice and peace and compassion that was revealed by and through Jesus.

This begins by allowing the light to enter into our darkness. And that can only begin by having the humility to admit that yes, there are times when we are in the dark, that there is much that we don’t know, or can’t do on our own.

The good news is that there is indeed light available to shine upon us, and to reflect off of us. Today I stand among you as a witness to testify to that light, the light coming into the world, the light that the darkness of the world has never been able to overcome.

For as the gospel writer declares, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Let us all bear witness to and reflect that light.

Amen.

Additional resources:

Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at CrossMarks Christian Resources; 3rd Sunday in Advent.
William Willimon, Dean of Duke Chapel; *Hoping for Christmas*, 12-12-1999.