

Witnesses to the Light

John 1:6-8

12/13/2020

Randy Lovelace

This morning, we turn again to this series on Light in Dark Places. We continue in the gospel of John, but it is particularly about the person of John the Baptist. Before I read the text from which I'll be basing the sermon on this morning, I want to begin in another gospel because it helps us to understand the central role that John the Baptist plays.

As I shared with the early service, in all the years in which I have preached advent services, I have never preached a sermon dedicated to John the Baptist, not because I thought he was unimportant. I generally have preached on John the Baptist in other places. But I was reminded of his being a primary figure, a central role in advent through the ministry of Fleming Rutledge in her book *Advent* which is a series of sermons that she preached over several decades. She comes again and again to this character of John the Baptist. And reflecting on what the scriptures have to say with regard to John the Baptist, I came to full agreement that he is in fact a very central figure in the advent story.

In preparation for today, I revisited the gospel testimony regarding John the Baptist and was brought to this passage in Matthew 11. And this will serve as my introduction to this service. This is the portion of the testimony where John the Baptist is now imprisoned, and he is hearing testimony from those who had followed him. He's hearing testimony about Jesus the Christ who is now teaching and doing the work which he had prophesied about, and so he begins to inquire is this the one? And word reaches Jesus regarding John's questions, and Jesus responds to those who were listening to his teaching. Jesus has this to say regarding John the Baptist. He says to the crowds who had gathered around, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" He's talking about John the Baptist here. He says,

"A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see, a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" [ESV]

And then Jesus, the redeemer, the light that has come into the world, says these things about John the Baptist. He says, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

What an amazing thing for Jesus to say regarding John the Baptist. He is saying that he is a central figure, not just in the story of preparing the way for Jesus to come in His public ministry, but this very church, Columbia Presbyterian Church and anyone who calls on the name of Jesus has spiritual lineage to the lips and message of John the Baptist. And yet, He would say that there is no one greater that has been born of a woman like John the Baptist, yet I tell you those who have heard the message of John the Baptist regarding me, that is Jesus, now become the light bearers of that message about me, and you will be part of what God is doing in the kingdom. He's talking about you.

The witness to the light causes the light to explode into testimony and bringing attention to Jesus, and those who would hear that message and come and follow and be faithful disciples of Jesus themselves become the light shining a light to the light. John the Baptist is absolutely a central figure to advent, but he is not one that we would expect. So while he bears witness to the light, he is a very interesting figure. And I think it bears an important part for us to understand what role he plays.

Hear now John 1:6-8.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your word. As your servant, as one who was called to preach and to teach your word, I too am a recipient of this message that John the Baptist preached. Lord, I ask may the words of my mouth bring glory and majesty and attention to the light of all lights, Jesus. But may you stir our hearts and our minds to hear the message of John the Baptist that we too might know that we have been called to be witnesses to the light. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we consider these brief verses in describing who John the Baptist was, I want you to know that he was three things that we will look at this morning. First, he is a peculiar witness. Secondly, he had a peculiar message. And third, he had a peculiar purpose. Peculiar witness, message, and purpose.

First, the peculiar witness. What is interesting is that as John says, "There was a man sent from God," he tells us already that this was one who was born of a woman, but he was born of a woman because it was God's intention to send forth John the Baptist as a particular messenger, a particular witness to what God was doing in the world. We learn from the other gospel testimonies regarding the nature of his birth and the nature of what he was to do.

It obviously stirred many things, not the least of which was his very parents. You know the story, perhaps. Zechariah, his father, was overcome with this vision that he was now going to be a father in his old age and his wife a mother in her years well beyond childbearing, and yet God would bring forth the blessing of being parents to this one. But this one would be so incredibly blessed by God, promised of God, sent by God that it would cause Zechariah to go to the temple, and in such a place as he was inquiring of God what kind of message this was, Zechariah was to become mute.

Imagine that. You go into the temple to inquire about what God was doing, why your wife is now pregnant, and what this means. And you go back outside the temple to greet your pregnant wife and family who is awaiting, but you can't tell them. Now, I don't know if you remember what it was like to be pregnant or to be married to a pregnant woman, but I will tell you that most women would not want their husbands to be mute. At least, only a few of you would. But imagine that. You're unable to talk about anything. This is before sign language. How do you express or explain what has just happened?

This is a message of what John summarizes very simply, "This is a man sent by God," because he is the promised one sent by God. And do you know the story that even in the womb of his mother in the presence of Mary carrying Jesus, even she would declare that her child John the Baptist was already leaping with joy. Even in utero, the promised witness was already bearing witness to the light.

But so far, that seems pretty good and pretty acceptable except for the fact that when he's actually born and grows up to be a witness, what we find is that this promised one who is to be a peculiar witness begins to carry out his peculiar ministry because he is out of sync. He is out of sync with the community around him. He is out of sync with his fellow religious colleagues. The gospel of Mark tells us in the opening verses that he is dressed in camel hair and leather, and he eats weird stuff. He's been hanging out in the wilderness, and he comes forth.

Hear what the testimony of Luke says regarding John's message. It isn't just what we hear which is John prophesying and repeating the words of Isaiah when he says, "The voice of the one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." So far so good. No one hearing John the Baptist, even dressed in what he was wearing and prophesying or reading Isaiah 40, would have thought necessarily that that was unusual. But after he quotes Isaiah 40, "Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. The crooked shall become straight. The rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Well, yes and amen, except with what he says next. John the Baptist looks at the crowds around him in verse 7, and he declares to the crowds who had come out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers!" Now, I haven't tried that with any audience I've ever preached to, but I'm guessing it's not what they expected.

The first thing we notice about his being a peculiar witness is that he's out of sync, and he's not preaching what they would expect. What he's doing is beginning to call things out. In so doing, he's beginning to say some things that are really, really uncomfortable. He says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

He is out of sync. He was out of sync with his surrounding environment so much so. Not only was he out of sync with what he said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, but he also was not afraid to speak truth to power. It was not regarding Herod's policies about which he wasn't afraid to speak to power, but it was about Herod's life. It would be the fact that John the Baptist, so out of sync, was willing to speak truth to Herod to such a degree to call him to account for the fact that he was about to marry his brother's wife. John the Baptist tells him, you can't do this. And he was thrown in jail for it.

It was from that place that he inquires, is this the one that I've been prophesying about? But he's so out of sync that he doesn't get out of jail. He ends up being beheaded as a consequence of a hasty promise given by Herod in a quasi-sexual display of a dancer before him. She was a woman so beautiful in her moves that he says, I will give you anything, up to half my kingdom. But it ends up being giving over John the Baptist's head. It would be scandalous then as it is scandalous now for us to consider, that this witness, this brother in Christ who leaped for joy in his mother's room at the presence of Jesus would lose his life because of the immoral decisions of a political leader and a woman who simply wanted him out of the way. He would never be able to see in his earthly life what Jesus would end up doing.

It is such a message. If we allow ourselves to see this peculiar witness, we are reminded that it is when we allow the message and messengers of the gospel to be so peculiar, so out of sync with the culture around them, that even God can use a peculiar witness to strike a straight line to knowing Jesus. This is a message for the church of Jesus Christ even this day.

The reason for this is because we need to remember, if you are a Christian, it is okay to be out of sync with the culture around you. I was reminded of this out of an article I read this past week written by a person who is not a Christian but is writing and responding to yet another very public fall of a minister who had great influence, Carl Lentz at Hillsong Church in New York City. In her article, she concludes the following. She says,

"I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me feel uncomfortable for not doing so. If they share 90 percent of my lifestyle and values, then there is nothing especially inspiring about them. Instead of making me want to be more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me. That sadly appears to have been true of Lentz and his fellow celebrity acquaintances."

What she calls out in the article is this whole notion that we want to have our well-lived lives with a twist of Jesus. We want to be enough like the world to gain the respect, to gain the influence with just a little Jesus thrown in. But it's very convicting to hear someone who's not a Christian who says that's not very inspiring because all the fire and noise you say about the gospel doesn't seem to have disrupted your life very much. So why should I think it needs to disrupt mine? I think that's a fair question.

John the Baptist was so peculiar in his witness that he was willing to sacrifice the respect and acceptance of his contemporaries. He was willing to call out those around him, to call out the religious leaders, to call out his fellow contemporaries, to call out power and say, but the light is coming. And he would ultimately lose his life as a result. How do we respond to that?

Beyond that, not only is he a peculiar witness, but he also had a peculiar message. Again, from the testimony of Luke 3, we learn something interesting about this message. I've already read it for you a few minutes ago. The first thing we learn about his peculiar message is it was a warning. It was a warning which is very hard to hear, but I'll see if we can translate it.

Again, he says to them in essence, I've warned you to flee the idolatry of the age and be prepared to follow the one who's coming after me who is the redeemer, who is the savior. He says, you are to "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." And he says this, "And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe has laid at the root of the trees." What he is saying to those who are hearing him is your background, your heritage, your religious upbringing, all of your intellectual architecture that you're putting your hope in, none of it means anything in the light of who Christ is. It doesn't get you in the door, and it doesn't keep you in the house. He says if you think it's your religious pedigree or your background, know this, that God can make children out of stones.

But I would tell you, if you allow me to speak biblically, theologically, metaphorically, isn't it the word that tells us through the prophets that "I will take from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh"? See, the reality is God has been making children out of stones from His work at the beginning of the word. And Jesus has come that we, stones, might be made alive. It's not about our pedigree. It's not about our background. It's not about our religious performance. It is only in the witness and work of Jesus.

What it means to do is to bear fruit. I was reminded of this in my own personal devotions this week which I coincidentally found myself smack in the middle of what Jesus is saying to His disciples when He reminds them, "Apart from me, you can do nothing," meaning there is no fruit in the Christian life, there is no flourishing in the Christian life apart from being united to and dependent on Jesus as redeemer. We can live well-lived lives with a twist of Jesus, but that's not biblical discipleship. And he's saying if we fail to see that this is what it looks like to grow and hear the warning of John, what it will tell us is if we're depending on anything other than the work of Christ for our lives, the axe is at the root of the trees.

So it's a warning. What fruit is in our lives? What fruit is He calling us to produce? All of it comes from being united in belief to Jesus Christ.

But it isn't just a warning. He also has something else in this peculiar message. While he warns, he then invites. He doesn't leave it at warning because he says the following, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." After the warning, he's inviting us into the repentance that is life, meaning repentance as a life. What do I mean?

We've talked about this before, the whole biblical understanding of the word "repent" or "repentance". It means we were going one direction, and now we repent of it, meaning we turn and go the opposite way. It's not just a moment in time decision. It is a continual choosing to turn from sin, to turn from denial of who Jesus is, and to walk in faithful discipleship and following of Him.

But what does that look like? John the Baptist tells us because the crowds ask him. They basically ask, what are you talking about? What do you mean? What is this fruit? And here is what John the Baptist says in Luke 3 when the crowds ask him, "What then shall we do?" He responds in three categories. First, "And he answered them, 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.'" This means that those who find themselves believing and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, we recognize that Jesus taught us that we have the righteousness of

Christ. We've been clothed in His righteousness, and He is the one who is providing for us. This means we have what we need, and we can walk into our closets and give generously because we know that the Lord has provided all of it anyway. We can give some away, and He'll continue to provide. We have food in our pantries that we can give to those in need. In other words, we turn to those who are poor because we who were poor have been made rich.

That's the first group. That's something all of us can consider. How can we help those around us who are in various kinds of needs?

And then the next group, he says, "Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'" Now, here, the IRS is not coming to Jesus. The point is these were Jews who were working on behalf of the Roman government now taking tax money from their own fellow people to send it up to Rome. What they would do is take some off the top and charge a little more. In essence for us today, he's saying if you're in the marketplace, no matter your job or work, are you doing it justly with integrity and righteousness, with honesty? How are you conducting yourself in the work that God has given you? Are we using it to seek the flourishing to others or using it to pad our own pockets?

But then there's the third group. "Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.'" Now, I want to translate here. I think in some sense he's talking to those who have power and authority because it's clear from this group that they could use threats and warnings to exact what they wanted in order to increase their power and influence.

I believe what he's saying here is that there are those of us who have power and authority, but the question is how are we using that power and authority? Are we using our power and authority to seek the flourishing of those who were called to serve? Or are we using those we serve to increase our flourishing? Those who have power and authority, are they using it to gain control of the stage or are they using their power and authority to lift up others?

These are just three categories of what it looks like to hear the invitation of what repentance as life looks like. There are so many other ways, and we could plug in several blanks if we want. But what John the Baptist is calling us to is he's giving witness to the light, and when the light comes into the world, it changes you. It changes me. And it leads to repentance as life that then causes us to be opened to allowing God to disrupt our motivations, our desires, our ambitions, and every square inch of our lives. I will go so far as to say that if we read this word and we say we've received this light of Jesus that John the Baptist points to, if our lives are not disrupted, then have we really heard about the light?

It should cause us to be uncomfortable. But in the discomfort, we find the grace that fuels our discipleship and the mercy that covers us knowing that the light has come into the world, and the darkness is removed. We find that there is warning, but there is also invitation that apart from Him, we can do nothing. But we can be called to a grace fueled and mercy shaped life changed by the power of the light of the gospel that is Jesus.

I finish with this. It isn't just the peculiar witness who had a peculiar message. He did have a peculiar purpose, and this was specific to John the gospel writer. He writes over and over again a repeated theme. "This is written as testimony that you may believe." And he says this was John the Baptist's purpose. He says, "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him." This belief is the word trust in different letters. Belief isn't about mental assent. It is about whole-life trust and saying Lord Jesus, not only do I believe you are the one who is the messiah and the redeemer, you are my Lord and my king. And I can trust you. It is a belief that life as it is meant to be lived can only be lived through the grace and mercy of Jesus whose name means He will save His people from their sins. We trust in that, but we're also empowered to live new lives.

But not just belief as his peculiar purpose, I believe also it is a reminder. John the Baptist "was not the light, but he came to bear witness about the light," and what he bore witness to was that this light, this one, this Jesus as John would tell us is full of grace and truth. He is our refuge. He is your refuge. He is my refuge. And He invites us into that refuge. It is an invitation to find forgiveness and rest.

Are you exhausted? Are you anxious? Are you fearful? Are you lonely? Whatever burdens you, there is a refuge that is the light of Jesus. And Jesus says, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And we become those who receive the refuge if we believe. We then also are made the light, the light who continues to bear light to the light.

For many years since I was in high school, I've always loved photography. I remember the day I got my very first camera. What's interesting is the word "photography" is made up of two words which literally mean light drawing. In today's world and culture, we are surrounded by images because everybody's a photographer. We have a camera on everything. It's almost as though we've become enslaved to images. We're not given to the idolatry of worshiping images, but we're enslaved to images. We're taking them, looking for the right lighting, looking for the right filter. Did I have the right smile? And nothing makes people more nervous and more excited at the same time except by putting their image out there or when you bring up a camera in front of them that they're not holding. We're putting all these images out there and desiring to be seen. It's almost like it's a race for perfection.

That kind of light drawing is not bringing relief. What Jesus calls us to here, what John the Baptist desires us to do is to rethink the whole idea. I would suggest that our very lives are meant to be light drawings of what God has done in Christ. His grace, His mercy, His light has transformed us. Therefore, our lives become light drawings of what Jesus is and what He has done. We bear witness to Him. We take our lives and shine the light not on ourselves but on Christ alone. We shine the light and witness love and worship on Christ. Jesus who is the light of the world still shines because the witnesses to the light point to Him, not at ourselves. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be glory."

Please hear this. The message to the church is not to look at the world and point the finger. If you're a believer, the posture is not to look at what's wrong with the world. No. We hear what John the Baptist has to say first as a message to us. Have we heard this message of the light? Have we been transformed by it in such a way that we're ready to be witnesses to it? The world may not understand, the world may ridicule, but that's okay because the light has changed everything. Let's pray.

Father, we now ask that you would help us to rejoice in the fact that the light has come and that this light has changed everything, and it has changed us. But you call us into a life that is repentance where we seek to take all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do, and we do all things through Him who strengthens us. Jesus, the redeemer and lover of our souls, is the light of the world. Lord, John the Baptist gave faithful witness to the light. We are recipients of that message. And may all those who have believed be light drawings that give you praise and honor and glory. In Jesus's name. Amen.