

Advent 3b - 2020

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen. Dear friends in Christ:

Today the church calls us, for a second week in a row, to think about John the Baptist. Last week we read about him from Mark's Gospel account, since his is the primary source for this year's readings. This week, because Mark's telling is so brief, we read about him from the Gospel of John.

John the Evangelist begins his account of John the Baptist by describing him as a man sent from God. He doesn't tell us how God sent him. Luke, you may recall, goes into great detail about John's calling – describing how the angel explains it to his father, Zechariah. Matthew and Mark ground John's calling in a prophecy of Isaiah – the one at the beginning of chapter forty.

John simply tells us he was sent from God. But then he also quickly moves to the point of the sending. God sent John to be a witness. The word "witness" is used three times in that short opening paragraph, cluing us about its importance.

John came to bear witness "that all might believe through him." This added phrase also speaks to the importance of John's witness, for when he says: "through him," he shows that John is God's instrument. John had an important calling indeed!

John's call was to witness to Jesus, here called "the light." Jesus would bring light to the world. Jesus was in fact "**the light of the world**," as he himself would later declare (8:12).

John's calling is also our calling. When the light is given to us, we become light bearers too. "*You are the light of the world*," Jesus once said to his disciples (Matthew 5:14).

Like John, we are those through whom others might believe. Jesus would later say to his disciples: "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*" (John 20:21). And again: "*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

On December 6th, the church remembered one of its great witnesses, Nicolaus, Bishop of Myra, better known as St. Nicolaus. Nicolaus gave witness to Christ through his many years of serving as a bishop, but even more famously through his generous gift-giving. Some of his gifts even saved people's lives.

A week later we remembered another great witness of the church: Lucia of Syracuse, also known as Saint Lucia or Saint Lucy. Lucia witnessed through generosity as well, giving much of her wealth to the poor. Her witness is specifically remembered as bringing light, since her name shares the root of the Latin word for light.

Unlike Nicolaus, however, Lucia also bore witness in another way. She bore witness through her early death. In the year 304, while still a young woman, Lucia was ordered by angry and powerful men to burn a sacrifice to the emperor's image – an act of renouncing her Christian faith. When she refused, she was killed.

During those early days of Christianity, many followers of Christ were killed because of their witness – so many, in fact, that the Greek word for witness, *marturia*, has now become our word "martyr."

As we think about John today, we should remember that he, too, was eventually killed for his faith. His local governor didn't appreciate his preaching and eventually locked him up. A short time later, John's head appeared on a platter. But not before John gave witness. John came to bear witness about the light. That was his calling. And that is what he did.

As we read more in today's text, we see that John repeats another word as well. That word is "confess." The text says: *"and this is the witness of John: when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"*

Confession is the public stating of what we believe. It's the same word we use for admitting our sins – just used in a slightly different way. Confession is about taking a stand and being willing to accept the consequences of that stand.

The fact that there are consequences to confession is made very clear as John's Gospel progresses. In chapter nine, when Jesus gives sight to a man who was born blind, an examination of this miracle by the Pharisees ensues. The man's parents try to put off the Pharisees, with John explaining that: *"His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue"* (9:22).

Later, in chapter twelve, John tells us that *"many of the authorities believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue."* John goes on to make clear that such hiding of one's confession is not right, saying: *"for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God"* (12:42-43).

There are many other passages in the New Testament which also call us to confess our faith. Confessing, we see, is an essential component of our witnessing. It reminds us that what we believe is not simply a private matter and that we are never to deny what we believe. John confessed and *"did not deny,"* says the text.

The Lutheran Church, as you should know, was formed based on sharing a specific confession of faith – done at a time when confessing that faith had great consequences. The Lutheran Church came into being as its congregations publicly stated their adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. Our pastors and congregations state that same adherence today.

Our Confessions center the church around the word and work of Jesus. In that regard they follow the example of John, who, when he was asked to confess his identity, used the opportunity to point to Jesus. The people had asked him: "Who are you?" In answering, John brings up the Christ – the Anointed One, the Messiah, for whom so many people were waiting, saying: "I am not the Christ."

This then led his questioners to ask about other Messianic figures. "Are you Elijah," they asked. Elijah was prophesied to return at the dawning of the new and final age. "No," says John, even though John did fulfill the prophecy. John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" – as the angel in Luke's Gospel said to John's father (1:16). John and Elijah were different people, but with a common calling.

Then they asked John if he was "the prophet." The particular prophet they had in mind was the one prophesied in Deuteronomy 18 – the one sometimes called "the new Moses." God had said of this prophet: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." Later,

after Jesus fed the five thousand, people would wonder if Jesus were this prophet (John 6:14). As a matter of fact, he was. And is!

John did eventually speak to his own identity. 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."

Upon hearing this, John's questioners then asked him why he was baptizing. They understood baptism to be a sign of conversion; and in their thinking, if John wasn't a leader of the Messianic age, then he wouldn't need to initiate converts.

John's baptism, however, was something different. It may have signaled the coming need for conversion, but its primary and most immediate purpose was to call people to repentance. John baptized as a means of "making straight the way of the Lord." His baptism led the people to repent of their sins and turn to God.

But the question to John did allow him to witness further. "I baptize with water," he said. "But among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

And with those words, John completed his witness on that day. He had shared enough. More would be said at other times. In fact, the very next day, John would point out Jesus to those around him and say: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

But on this day, he had no more to say. He had given his questioners plenty to contemplate. And the words he said are plenty for us to contemplate today too.

On this day we take note that John was simply the voice, pointing to one who was greater. And that's an important lesson: we are to witness to Jesus, and not ourselves.

The world teaches us that we ought to self-promote. It preaches the power of "you" and says that because "you are the answer," other people should know it.

We say, instead, that Jesus is the great one. He's far greater than us – because of his greater wisdom, and because we are all sinners.

We witness to Jesus. Not ourselves. And not to the church either.

Churches bring very good things. They facilitate nice community. They may even be strong in confession – at least they should be. But they will always have failings as well. They are made up of sinners; and led by sinners. They can only be a voice, never the savior.

Jesus is the savior. He's the one who came and dealt with our broken world. He did this by showing the way of faithfulness, holiness and peace. And he did it by paying the price for human sin, so that sinners might be forgiven and made holy in the eyes of our Creator and Judge.

Jesus did all this when he came to our world at the time of John. And we remember, too, that Jesus will do even more when he comes again someday soon. At that time everyone will see him as the Messiah that he is. And he will usher in the new age. Those who are saved will then experience endless joy in the new creation.

Until that day, we his followers are to witness and confess what he has done for us. We tell of the manger. We tell of the cross. We speak to others. And we remind ourselves.

And, above all, we listen. We listen to Christ as he speaks through the witnesses he has sent – the prophets, apostles and evangelists of the holy scriptures. We listen as he speaks through the voice of John, and through all those who faithfully cry out in the wilderness today.

On this day that the Lord has given us to worship him and hear his word, let us give thanks that the Lord calls us so clearly. He makes his voice heard – even through all the noise and confusion of this world.

And let us give thanks, too, for his promise that his voice will never be silenced. He will continue to send forth among us those who preach, just as he sent John the Forerunner into the world.

Finally, let us give thanks for his leading and guiding as we witness and confess in our day. God is with us. And he will protect and care for us.

May we all rest secure in this faith. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and our Savior. Amen.