

4th Sunday in Advent: December 23, 2018
“A Big Mouth and A Pointing Finger”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text for this morning is our Gospel lesson, John 1 especially these words, “**John 1:19-23.**”

Today is the last Sunday of Preparation in Advent, and historically is known as Rorate Coeli, the Sunday of Preparation. It is the last Sunday before Christmas, and the focus of the day comes from Isaiah 45, “*Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit.*”¹ Prepare o earth, the Savior is coming!

Today could easily be called “John the Baptizer Sunday,” but John would have objected. As the forerunner of Christ, it is fitting that we reflect on his words today. John was the forerunner of Christ, not the Christ. He was a witness to the light, not the light itself. John did not try to eclipse the light. He was a voice, preaching Christ, the light of the world. He was a finger, pointing people to Jesus, and saying, “There he is, the One you’ve been waiting for. Behold, the Lamb of God. Who takes away the sin of the world.”

Ancient Christian art depicts John with an overly large mouth and a hyperextended index finger, pointing to the Lamb of God. A big mouth and a finger—that was John. I don’t know about you, but as a child, I was taught that it was impolite to point. My mom used to say when you point, there are three more fingers pointing back at you. Having a big mouth wasn’t any better.

John was both; he was a witness. *Witness* is one of those weighty words in the Gospel according to St. John. It doesn’t quite mean the same thing as the way we sometimes use it for the activity of declaring the Gospel to another. Witness here means authoritative eyewitness, one who tells exactly what he has seen and exactly what he has heard. Scripture says that every matter must be established by at least two or three witnesses for it to be considered true. John lines up seven witnesses that testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. They

¹ Isaiah 45:8

are John the Baptizer, the Holy Scriptures, the works that the Father does through Jesus, Jesus himself, the Holy Spirit, the apostles, and St. John's own Gospel.

The first thing we must say about John is that he was sent by God. He didn't venture out from the wilderness on his own initiative. Even before he was conceived, his sending was already a done deal. As we have walked through during on time on Wednesdays, "***He will go on before the Lord,***" said the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, "***in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.***"²

John was sent from God to give testimony, which is all that a witness is good for. A witness for the Lord testifies to what he has seen and heard from the Lord. His testimony is so that others will believe through him. *Through* him, that is, through his testimony, not *in* him. John was an instrument, not an object. John's testimony was not so that people would believe in John, but that through John all people would believe in Christ. His message was not "follow me," rather it was "follow Him." John was not the light that gives life to the world; nor are we, though we sometimes think we're brighter bulbs than most in the world.

The problem is that we tend to confuse the witness with his testimony; we tend to mix the message with the messenger. We often pay more attention to the person than to the office. One occasionally hears of a congregation that gets rid of its pastor for no other reason than he doesn't tell funny stories or write amusing bulletin announcements. We might pause and wonder how John, dressed in camel's hair and leather, picking honey-coated grasshoppers from his teeth, preaching repentance and baptism, would fare today.

"***We do not preach ourselves,***" wrote the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, "***but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.***"³ That was how St. Paul distinguished the Lord's ministry from that of the so-called "super-apostles," those high-octane preachers who came blasting through Corinth to separate people from the Gospel—not to mention their wallets and each other.

² Luke 1:17

³ 2 Corinthians 4:5

Whenever God speaks, there are certainly questions. His clear word raises all sorts of objects from sinful people, and in our reading today we see questions from the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and we see how mixed they saw the message and the messenger.

The religious leaders of Jerusalem were stuck on the messenger, but didn't hear the message. Expectations in Israel at the time of John were running higher than those of my children two days before Christmas. John's appearance in the wilderness of the Jordan created quite a stir. Enough of a stir that the religious authorities in Jerusalem took notice and sent a committee to ask John, "Who are you?" or probably more to the point, "Who do you think you are?" John clearly confessed. There were no delusions of grandeur with John, he said, "I am not the Christ."

The retort then was, "Then are you Elijah?" If you remember, over 400 years earlier, the prophet Malachi had said that Elijah would come before the Christ comes. You'll recall that Elijah had been taken up to heaven bodily in a fiery chariot. A popular expectation was that Elijah would return one day to signal the coming of the Messiah. Was John the prophet Elijah come back to earth? Well, dressed in Elijah's camel's hair and a leather belt, he sure looked the part. In truth, John came in the spirit and power of Elijah. Jesus himself said that John was Elijah for those who would believe it. But John will not apply the honor of Elijah to himself. "I am not," he says.

The leaders continue with their inquisition of John, "Are you the Prophet?" If John was not Elijah, perhaps he was the prophet spoken of by the Lord through Moses in Deuteronomy: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."⁴ Again, more popular expectation. Could John be the great Prophet walking in the shoes of Moses? And indeed, John was the last and greatest of the prophets, the one who was sent to point directly to the Christ. But again John declines to appropriate any glory for himself. "No," John replies. John does not give lengthy replies to His accusers, his answers grow short. He is a witness to the light. He wants to talk about Jesus, not himself.

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:18

That's what true "witnessing" is all about — not what God has done for me lately, because I'm so religious, but what God in Christ has done for you. Witnessing is not "Jesus loves me, this I know." That's boasting—true and holy boasting, but boasting nonetheless. "Jesus loves you, this I know." That's witnessing.

The priests and Levites were running out of questions, and still had nothing to send back to headquarters. They needed an answer, "Who then are you? What do you say about yourself?" And John said, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness." John is a voice. Not the Christ, not Elijah, not the Prophet—just Isaiah's voice calling in the wilderness. "Get ready. The Messiah's coming. He's already here. Make straight the way of the Lord."

John wasn't sent to talk about himself, to deliver stirring personal testimonials, or to win a huge following. He was sent to prepare a people for the Lord by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His person and personality were completely covered and overshadowed by the person of Jesus. John says, "Don't look to me because I'm not the Christ. I'm not Elijah. I'm not the Prophet. I'm nothing but a voice ringing in your ears, telling you that now is the time to repent and be baptized because the Lord is near." John is nothing; Jesus is everything. "***He must increase, and I must decrease.***"⁵

The Pharisees try to press John further. They refused to listen to John's confession and turned then to his works. "Why then do you baptize?" Their question goes beyond identity to authority. The Pharisees recognized that for John to baptize was no small thing. You didn't go and invent a baptism on your own. But John refuses even to address their question. There wasn't time for discussion. A Greater One than John was coming. In fact, the Greater One was already standing in their midst, in the same crowd, listening to the questions, hidden, soon to be revealed. The light of the world was about to dawn. This was such a crucial moment that the evangelist even notes the location: "***This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.***"⁶

The next day John would extend his piercing gaze out across the crowd and point his finger in the direction of the lone figure coming toward him and declare,

⁵ John 3:30

⁶ John 1:28

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”⁷ Only then would John answer the Pharisee’s question about his baptizing. ***“The reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on Him. I would not have known Him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and testify that this One is the Son of God.”***⁸

A big mouth and a pointing finger: The church is that voice and a finger in today’s wilderness of sin and terror and death—a voice to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name—a finger pointing to Jesus. There’s the One for you. There is your forgiveness, your life, your salvation. There is true light, a light that already shines on you and on all. There He is in the water of your Baptism. There He is in the mouth of the preacher absolving your sin. There He is in the bread that is His body, in the wine that is His blood.

That’s what being a witness to Jesus means. Not pointing to me and saying, “Be religious like me.” But pointing to Jesus in the Word, the water, the bread and the wine, and testifying on his behalf: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Your sin. He died bearing your sin. He rose holding your life in his life. He reigns and in him you reign too.” That’s the church’s testimony, her witness, and her martyrdom.

One word of warning. The word for witness is the same word from which we get “martyr.” A witness is a martyr who testifies to his or her death. You might suffer, a lot for this big mouth and pointing finger, but have no fear. You’ve already died in Jesus, you’ve been baptismally buried into his death. You are in the ultimate witness protection program, embraced by the death of the Son of God who loved you and gave himself up for you. You are clothed with Christ, covered from head to toe with his righteousness. You are already dead to the world, dead to sin, dead to death. And your life is safely hidden in Christ, tucked away where no one can take it. You’ve got nothing to lose. That’s the beauty of being dead in yourself, but alive to God in Christ. The dead have nothing to lose.

⁷ John 1:29

⁸ John 1:32-34

We don't have to hide under false identities, like some frightened witness with a death threat over our head. We don't have to put on the fake nose and glasses of phony piety and religion. We can be ourselves, telling the truth about our sin, and even more about our Savior, the world's Savior. Pointing people to Jesus. Look! There's the light who shines on you!

You and I are not the light. Jesus is the light, the world's light, who shines in this present darkness with a light no darkness can overcome. Not even the darkness of our sin or the terrors of death can overcome this glorious light who is Jesus. He's been shining on the creation from the beginning, since day one as the creative Word who redeemed the world with His death on a dark Friday. The light has come into the world and the darkness could not overcome it. "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel!" Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of the Church
Fourth Sunday in Advent
23 December 2018**

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. Heavenly Father, throughout this Advent season we have heard that Christ has come in the flesh. He comes to us today in Word and Sacrament, and He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may be kept firm in Your Word and steadfast in the faith until we are received into Your eternal Kingdom. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of faithfulness, we rejoice that You fulfilled Your promise to send the Messiah. Grant that Your people may celebrate the birth of Christ by hearing the Word, singing Your praises and receiving His Holy Supper. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of truth, as John the Baptist served as the voice crying out in the wilderness, so also pastors continue to preach Your Word of truth in the wilderness of this fallen world. We give You thanks for the men You have raised up for this holy task. Bless them and their labors, and continue to send workers into Your vineyard, that there may be a bountiful harvest. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of justice, You establish earthly government and teach us to obey those who rule over us. Send Your blessing upon all who make, administer and judge our laws, that Your people may serve You in peace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of mercy, we are thankful for all those whose vocations call them to care for us in our time of need, including law officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, doctors and nurses. Keep them in Your providential care, and bless them in their duties. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of compassion, You teach us to make our requests known to You so that we are not anxious about anything. Send Your healing hand upon the sick and the suffering [*including _____*]. Grant that Your peace will guard them in Christ Jesus. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, our times are in Your hands. Look with favor, we pray, on Your servants ***Bridget & Megan*** whom You have granted another year of earthly life. Grant that *they* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *their* trust in Your goodness all the days of *their* life; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Lord God, Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the joy and blessings that You have granted ***David & Bridget*** during the years of their marriage. Assist them always by Your grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards You and for each other, and come at last to the eternal joys that You have promised; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**