

“To Be a Witness” John 1:6-8, 19-28

Scripture Reading

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,^[a] the Son of God,^[b] ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”^[c]—

³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”^[d]

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with^[e] water, but he will baptize you with^[f] the Holy Spirit.”

Footnotes:

- a. Mark 1:1 Or *Jesus Christ. Messiah* (Hebrew) and *Christ* (Greek) both mean *Anointed One*.
- b. Mark 1:1 Some manuscripts do not have *the Son of God*.
- c. Mark 1:2 Mal. 3:1
- d. Mark 1:3 Isaiah 40:3
- e. Mark 1:8 Or *in*
- f. Mark 1:8 Or *in*

Message

To Be a Witness

One of the many things I love about God's Word, is that the Bible communicates to all of us. No matter the language we speak; no matter our culture, personality type, or learning style, when God's Word comes it communicates God's salvation. It speaks His invitation to return to relationship with Him. For though the books of the Bible were penned by dozens of people, each with their own character & style, the unifying message about God, humanity, sin, forgiveness, love and salvation is made available to all people. This unity of message amid the diversity of authors is for me one of the best indications of God's Spirit at work throughout the Bible. It is indeed God's Word.

And because it is, after a New Year's reminder about the crucial place of prayer in our lives, we as a faith community are going to celebrate this power of God's Word in 2012 by helping one another to read 100 essential passages from the Bible; 50 from the Old Testament and 50 from the New Testament. Adult Sunday School Classes, Small Groups and Sunday morning messages will all support this effort because of the Bible's ability to communicate God's messages to us.

I am praying that God will use the first 5 months of 2012 to not only speak clearly to us, but to draw others closer to God and His salvation in Christ. For God's Word communicates truth to people, and sometimes the same story communicated by differing authors, communicates multiple truths.

An example of the different ways the Bible communicates God's truths is today's Word from the Gospel of John, when we contrast it with the parallel account from the Gospel of Mark which we just read:. As you will notice in a second:

- Both passages present John the Baptist, and
- Both passages place us at the Jordan where people have come to hear John's message and consider a new start .

John's Gospel will describe the setting of John the Baptist's work was "the other side of the Jordan" River. That was a very meaningful place to the Jews of His day. For it was from there that the Israelites first came into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership, full of hope, faith & optimism as God's children. For as was typical of God's prophets, John the Baptist's message came both in word and action, so in calling people to baptism "from the other side of the Jordan", John was not only calling for repentance, but was also (very symbolically) inviting them to re-enter the Promised Land. He was offering them God's invitation to restart... to experience a new beginning, a second chance. Mark's Gospel noted the tremendous response to this invitation. People knew their need for change, for repentance.

Both Mark and John begin their Good News of Jesus Christ by introducing us to John the Baptist's ministry, but they do so in very different ways. For while Mark emphasized the need for repentance; a changed heart in order to receive Christ, John's emphasis is on the privilege of offering witness to the hope God has given us in Jesus Christ.

It is this second truth we focus in on this morning:

After introducing us to Christ as “the Word”; the Word that has always existed, the Word that called creation into being, the Word that gives us knowledge of God; a light so that we can see and make sense of all of life... after doing that in only 5 opening verses, the Apostle John introduces us to John the Baptist as a witness to that light:

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ *There was a man sent from God whose name was John.* ⁷ *He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.*

⁸ *He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

...

¹⁹ *Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders^[a] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.* ²⁰ *He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”*

²¹ *They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”*

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²² *Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”*

²³ *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”^[b]*

²⁴ *Now the Pharisees who had been sent²⁵ questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”*

²⁶ “I baptize with^[c] water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Footnotes:

- a. John 1:19 The Greek term traditionally translated *the Jews (hoi Ioudaioi)* refers here and elsewhere in John’s Gospel to those Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus; also in 5:10, 15, 16; 7:1, 11, 13; 9:22; 18:14, 28, 36; 19:7, 12, 31, 38; 20:19.
- b. John 1:23 Isaiah 40:3
- c. John 1:26 Or *in*; also in verses 31 and 33 (twice)

Again, through the Apostle John we are drawn to a God not so much through our brokenness (as was the case in Mark), but rather through an excitement that in Jesus our hope in God is being fulfilled; a light has come, an expanding light shining through our darkness.

This truth conveyed in John’s Gospel, is symbolized in the Advent Wreath, where week after week God’s gift of light; the truth of salvation in Christ, grows brighter and brighter. Today we celebrate through John’s Gospel message that

SS/TS: While we wait for the light to fully come in all its radiance, we have the joy of being a witness of Jesus to others.

1. We wait with hope in God for our salvation.

Last week we spoke of the importance of patience as we wait with hope in God for our salvation. The Apostle John’s description of John the Baptist’s encounter with priests and Levites sent by the people of Jerusalem is a description of impatience. History speaks to this sense of

impatience as first-century Jews endured oppressive rule under Roman occupation. You can almost hear a tone of anger, or frustration in the voice of John the Baptist's interrogators after he tells them that he is not the Christ they have been looking for:

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

Impatience wells up in people who are oppressed, people who have been waiting for generations for God's salvation. If it is John the Baptist they want to know, or if John knows who it is they'll take that news as well. Their sense of impatience was undoubtedly fueled by the despair of the people around them...

- people becoming poorer as Roman occupiers grow richer,
- people feeling increasing vulnerability with the increasing presence of the Roman Empire.

As people become impatient for God's salvation, and go to Priests and Levites with their questions, you can count on the patience of religious leaders to grow thin as well.

Can we relate to a growing impatience amid growing problems?

When life is on the upswing; when jobs are available and year-end bonuses are supplemented by annual raises in salary, impatience is minimal compared to these days. Hard times accelerate impatience.

So we are similar to those questioning John the Baptist. We see our world and our problems, but nothing beyond them. We feel our suffering, but fail to imagine God's salvation being worked out through that very suffering. With such an outlook, impatience fuels immediate action.

When we fail to wait with hope in God, impatiently pushing our solutions, we will create a false salvation.

Such was the case in Jesus' day. Many false messiah's rose up in the decades before Jesus; their following was fueled by human impatience. They didn't want to wait for God salvation, so they took it upon themselves to go to battle against their occupiers. But unlike Jesus, their followings died with their leaders. So we too must be careful, for our impatience will also create false messiahs; a person, a plan, a strategy that will "save us" but not really; for it will lack God's wisdom and will.

So we must wait with hope in God for our salvation. And John the Baptist did that as he pointed the impatient religious leaders to the one who was still to come; One whose sandals John was unworthy to untie.

Someone great is coming... don't let impatience allow you to settle for something or someone less!

And as we wait with hope in God for our salvation, like John the Baptist;
2. We have the joy of being a witness of Jesus to others.

Though it may have become this way in our culture, Christianity is not a passive faith. When we put our faith in Jesus we are called to follow Him.

We are called to:

- take up our cross,
- go into all the world,
- to preach and teach the Good News,
- baptize others in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit.

In short, we are called to actively bring the light of God's salvation to all the people of this earth.

We are by no means called to be passive in God's plan of salvation. And why should we be passive? Through Christ we have been adopted as God's children, heirs of the riches of Christ. And as God's children we have been given the privilege to participate in the very work of Heaven!

As we wait in hope we joyfully follow Christ by walking in His ways; not only by sharing His salvation in the words we say, but also in how we live our lives.

Think about John the Baptist.

I think it is safe to conclude that He stood out from the crowd; a non-conformist, one who modeled a life apart from the norm. As followers of Christ in a sin-filled world, our lives should likewise stick out as light differentiates itself from darkness. We can do this as friends, neighbors and relatives to other people, but we need to do this as a family of faith as well. Kevin Ford, in his excellent book "Transforming Church", calls American Churches to repenting from the ways we have allowed our culture to mold

the Body of Christ. He confronts churches to rid themselves of a consumeristic/individualistic mentality that robs God's church of the community it has inherited in Christ, a community of hope, joy and support, encouraging patience as we wait for God's salvation.

And as we wait, actively walking in Jesus' ways we also get to joyfully proclaim Christ as the hope (the light of the world)

Again, like John the Baptist, it is important that we are not misunderstood as the hope. This is as true for us individually as well as the church. For no matter how hard we try, our sinfulness will always cause us to fall short of the glory of God. If we fail to point others to the hope we have in Jesus, and cause them to put their hope in us as individuals, or in us as a church, we are setting them up for disappointment. For as much as we learn to reflect God's love and care, we will always fall short of the very source of that love.

Think for a moment, how often have people given up on Jesus Christ when one Christian or one church has failed them. Yet, Jesus is Savior, we are not.

As God's Children waiting in hope, we joyfully proclaim Christ as the hope... He is the light of the world; He is the one who clearly offers us the truth of God's love, forgiveness and salvation.

It is interesting to note that while John the Baptist faithfully did this: deflecting attention away from himself and on to Jesus, he really didn't know much about Jesus. But what little he knew he shared:

.. among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

But then, as recorded in the Gospel, John offers two powerful words of witness concerning Jesus immediate following today’s passage, both offering John’s witness to Jesus as “The Lamb of God”.

- In the first case it was the next day when Jesus came to be baptized.
- In the second, it was the following day when John was with his disciples and Jesus walked by. This second witness sent two of John’s disciples to Jesus, one of them was Andrew. Scripture records what happened then:

John 1:41-42a

⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus.

And if you remember Jesus’ 12 disciples, this Simon is “Peter”, the one whose faith would define Christ’s Church here on earth.

In John the Baptist we see the power of witness; the power of a life set apart for God’s work, a reflection of God’s light that points people to Jesus Christ. This was John the Baptist’s calling, and this too is the privilege we have as God’s Children.

Perhaps like John the Baptist, we will join with the majority of God's prophets who didn't see the full results of their witness before death, though they knew the joy of pointing others to God's salvation because they waited with hope in God. And yet, as with the candles of Advent, when we share Jesus with others, that light grows brighter every day and fills the world with hope.

Today, together with the Apostle John, I invite you to be a part of something that matters for all eternity. I invite you to wait upon God and put your hope in Him, and as you wait to offer a witness of Jesus to others.

Christmas time is a wonderful time to share your faith in Jesus Christ. Though Rhode Island no longer has an official "Christmas" trees but only a "Holiday" tree, and retail stores are increasingly taking the "Christ" out of Christmas in order to sell more merchandise to a changing cliental, your celebration of Jesus' birth certainly gives you occasion to talk about Jesus and what he means to you.

- The peace of Christ amid the craziness of the holiday season,
- The free gift of God amid holiday overspending,
- The light of the world, amid headlines of growing worldly darkness.

As you remember the witness offered by John the Baptist, rejoice because your witness of Jesus is exactly what the world needs to hear; it is the "perfect gift" to offer this year and every year!

Be open to the ways God will use you in all your unique ways, to point others to God's salvation in Jesus. All you need to be is willing, willing to offer your witness of Jesus. This week I especially encourage you to use our "Bread for the Journey" weekly devotional as it will help you to more clearly understand the witness you have. AMEN

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Bread for the Journey

A weekly scripture guide for the Community Covenant family of faith

December 12-18, 2011 Offering a Witness for Jesus

Monday, December 12

Read: 1 Peter 3:15; 1 John 1:3. We are asked by God to always be ready to share our hope in Christ, and as John reminds us we simply share what we ourselves have experiences. Think about your experiences you can share as this week you note how the Apostle Paul offers his witness to King Agrippa as recorded in Acts 26. *

Tuesday, December 13

Read: Acts 26:2-3. Our witness of Christ is a "door-opener" more so than a "convincing tool". Notice how Paul will use his situation of needing to defend himself in order to talk about Jesus. How might Jesus naturally fit into your discussions about life and the choices you make?

Wednesday, December 14

Read: Acts 26:4-11. Notice how Paul talks about his life before Jesus. Because Jesus transforms our lives it is helpful for others to know your "before" before they hear of your "after"; after Jesus touched your life. What were you like before God's love, joy, peace, motivation, meaning/purpose & salvation came into your life? What unsuccessful ways did you try to find these things in life before Jesus touched your heart?

Thursday, December 15

Read: Acts 26:12-20. While everyone believer will come to Christ in differing ways, your witness tells just how you can to make a decision that Jesus is Lord and the very source of God's salvation. What event or series of events caused you to come to the conclusion that Jesus died for your sins and that by receiving the gift of His life you now have a new life in Him?

Friday, December 16

Read: Acts 26:21-23. Having shared what your life was like *before* Jesus, and then how it was you *came* to faith in Jesus, now you can share what life has been like *after* Jesus. How is God helping you to address your deepest needs? How has God helped you amid the difficulties which are a part of life? How have you experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Saturday, December 17

Read: Acts 26:24-29. Finally, a personal witness for Jesus can end in one of two ways. If your words were well received you can encourage your hearer to accept God's salvation in Christ. If their response was neutral or negative, make yourself available for future questions or conversation. Remember, a "successful" witness is simply obedience to God in sharing your story. How a person receives your witness is between that person and God.

* Source: Discipleship Journal 60:63-69 "How to Share Your Testimony"