

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: John 1:6–8, 19–28**

**Sermon: “Witness”**

This Sunday could easily have been called “John the Baptizer Sunday,” but John would have objected. John was the forerunner of Christ, not the Christ. He was a witness to the light who didn’t 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.”

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. As children, most of us were taught that it was impolite to point. I remember a teacher once saying, “When you point, most of your fingers point at you.” Having a big mouth wasn’t any better. But John was a witness a mouth with a voice, a finger pointing to another.

Witness is one of those weighty words in the Gospel according to 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 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 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.

John was sent from God. That's the first thing we must say about him. John was sent. He didn't venture out from the wilderness on his own initiative. Even before he was conceived, his sending was already a done deal. *"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"* (Luke 1:17).

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," but "follow him." "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." 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, the message with the messenger. We often pay more attention to the person than to the office. 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"*** (2 Corinthians 4:5). That was how 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.

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 a five-year-old two weeks 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?" Religious institutions are always wary of wilderness prophets.

"I am not the Christ," John confessed. No delusions of grandeur with John.

Then are you, Elijah? 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? But John says "I am not."

If John was not Elijah, perhaps he was the prophet spoken of by the Lord through Moses. ***“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”*** (Deuteronomy 18:18). 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. His answers grow short. He’s a witness to the light. He wants to talk about Jesus, not himself. 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.

Who then are you? The priests and Levites were running out of questions, and still had nothing to send back to headquarters. What do you say about yourself? And John said, ***“I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness.”*** A voice. Not the Christ, not Elijah, not the Prophet just a voice calling in the wilderness. “Get ready. 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."

The Pharisees try to press John further. "Why then do you baptize?" Their question goes beyond identity to authority. The Pharisees recognized that for John to baptize was no small thing. 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.”***

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, ***“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”*** 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.”***

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 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, my sin. He died bearing our sin. He rose holding our life in his life. 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 lose your head, as John did. But not to worry. 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.

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. And you and I have the privilege to speak of him and point to him.

Amen