

"THE ONE WHO BORE WITNESS"

A Message by the Rev. Dr. Peter Lawson

John 1:1-14

December 23, 2018

The Gospel of John, more than the other gospels, defines the divinity of Jesus Christ. If you look at the opening verses of John's gospel, you'll see it makes stunning claims about who Jesus is. It claims that Jesus was the word and the Word was with God from the very beginning, and that all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made which was made. John's gospel claims Jesus as the light of God, and with the coming of Jesus, "the Light shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." This what we proclaim each Christmas, that this Son of God leaped from the balcony of heaven and became human flesh. This word lived among us full of grace and truth, shining God's light where darkness once was.

Yet, amidst these stunning claims about who Jesus Christ is, is the mention of another person, and this person's name is John. The writer of the Gospel wants to make it clear this man John was not the light, but rather he was the one who bore witness to the Light. He was not the word who became flesh, but the one who bore testimony about the Word. Yet, you have to think this man John was man of significance and influence to be mentioned right alongside the name of Jesus in these opening verses. And we wonder what it was about this man John that the gospel writer would give him such a prominent place as that.

The first we glimpse we get of John, he doesn't appear to be all that attractive of a person. The Bible says he wore a leather belt and clothing made of camel's hair. He lived in the desert and ate wild locusts and honey, with hair and beard looking like they had never been cut or washed.

And the words which John spoke could not have made him very attractive either. John's message was to tell people that they were unworthy of the God they worshipped. One gospel account says that John called the people who gathered before him a "brood of vipers," warning them to flee from the wrath of God which was to come. As I heard it said, when John the Baptist preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.

Now I would like to ask you to consider the Christmas cards you have received over your lifetime. Perhaps you've received your share with a portrait of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus at the manger, or making their trek to Bethlehem. Some of you may have received cards with the shepherds who were watching their flocks by night, when they received the announcement that unto them a child was born. Or, perhaps a portrait of the wise men bearing their gifts to the baby Jesus. But I would wager not a one of you received a Christmas card with a picture of John the Baptist on it. Can you imagine? "Greetings from our house to yours, you brood of vipers."

Everything I know about John makes me think I would have gone out of my way not to see him. He sounds too much like those street evangelists who wave their Bibles and tell you that you are going straight to hell if you don't repent now – and of course they are the ones who know how you are supposed to do that and whether or not you have succeeded – but there is one big difference between them and John. Self-appointed prophets tend to come after you. They get in your face and dare you to ignore them. John the Baptist planted himself in the middle of nowhere, in the desert, and if anyone wanted to hear what John had to say, they had to go out and see him. But still they came, out of the towns and villages and cities, to hear the

harsh message John had for them. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath of God which is to come? Repent and be baptized." However harsh his message may have been, people listened. In their brokenness, their emptiness, and their hurt they obeyed and were baptized in the muddy waters of the River Jordan.

It wasn't long before John became the center of people's attention and the focus of their aspirations. They began to wonder if he was the long awaited for Messiah. The religious leaders who resided in the city, seeing all this fervor for John, also began to wonder, and I can imagine them sitting down and having a round table discussion about what they were going to do with this curious man in the desert who was baptizing the people they were supposed to be overseeing. And the Bible portrays a scene where these leaders, in their long flowing black robes, make their trek to the place where John lived. They asked him, "Are you the anointed one of God? Are you the one upon whom we are to place our hopes as the savior for the people of Israel?"

And John's response to them is, "No. I am a voice crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord.' The one who comes after me, I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal." John understood his role as the one who prepared the way for Jesus. He was not the light; he came to bear witness to the light.

There are two scenes in the Bible which I think truly demonstrate the kind of person John was, and what he understood his role to be in relation to Jesus.

The first occurs when John is standing with two of his disciples, two of his closest confidants. And when he sees Jesus, he cries out, "Behold the Lamb of God." Upon hearing John say this, these two disciples leave John and follow Jesus. They depart from the witness and follow the lamb.

The second occurs when people approach John asking again if he was the messiah. And again, John says, "No, I am not the messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. I am the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him and rejoices at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled." And then he says this: "He must increase, and I must decrease."

This is the greatness of John the Baptist. Even as people were willing to bow down to him as their messiah he refused it. When people were willing to praise him as their new king, he deflected that praise and instead pointed to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He was a witness and nothing more.

You see, John the Baptist knew his life was as compromised as those who came to hear his message of repentance. He was just another sinner lining up shoulder to shoulder needing the forgiveness which only Jesus Christ could give. He was a member of the brood of vipers himself. That is why he says, "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal." That is why when Jesus came to be baptized by John he says, "I am the one who should be baptized by you." If John the Baptist wanted to get into a popularity contest with Jesus, he could have done it and may have even won, because there was such a fervor of popularity about him. But John knew what his role was.

And we know this is not what we humans naturally do. In fact it runs against the grain of what we are encouraged to do, and that is to grab after all the attention you can to be the person you want to be. In the world of competition you increase yourself at every opportunity and make the other guy decrease so you can come out the winner. In the world of self-fulfillment, we are told to pour every life experience and abundance into yourself so that you can be the happiest person you can be and if it means taking from someone else to get it, that's ok.

Not so with John the Baptist. He never lost sight of who he was and who Jesus was and who he was in relation to everyone else. There's a painting which shows John the Baptist at the river Jordan and the people are pressing in around him to hear what he has to say and want to be baptized. His right hand is extended toward the people around him, and with his left hand he is pointing to the banks on the other side of the river. And guess who it is that is standing there.

To me that visual of John at the Jordan is what the Christian life is about, learning to point, not to ourselves but to the one who is the true source of the good that we are and the potential of what we can be, the power at work within us who is able to do far more abundantly than we could ask or think.

Can you imagine if the words of John, "He must increase and I must decrease," were written on the walls in rooms where people in power made decisions about the future of our country and our world? Or, if they were inscribed on the tables in board rooms of major corporations who were making decisions which impact thousands of people? If they were taken seriously we would have to think it would be a different kind of world. Yet, we know that's not realistic because we don't control the motives and actions of people who are in these positions. But we can control *our* motives and *our* actions and we can write those words within us and take them seriously in our relationship with God and other people.

The witness of John is that if we want to embrace the word who became flesh, it's not about us rising up but stooping down. There is a peculiar statue of Christ in a Protestant cathedral in Copenhagen. When you stand on the right transept, you see this life-sized figure of Christ carved in marble. But the figure of Christ is shaped in such a way, that when you stand in front of him, you can't see his face. The head is bent over. But if you look in front of the statue, you will see there is a prayer kneeler. And it's not until you kneel and look up, that you can look into the face of Christ. This was John's message and what he lived. Jesus referred to John as a burning and shining lamp. He also said "of those born of women, there was none greater than John." This is to say that even though John was a witness to the light and nothing more, he was nothing less than that either. And that witness prepared the way for Jesus. When we learn the art of stooping down, and of pointing away from ourselves, then we have captured the meaning of John's witness, which is also ours.

After the baptism of Jesus, the voice of John grows fainter in the gospels. He walked off the stage and made room for the Lamb of God. And in John's mind, that's exactly what he wanted.