

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Witness to the Light

John 1:24-34

Sunday, January 14, 2024

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One day, a gentleman came into my office who wanted to share his Christian witness, his testimony about Christ. I sat and listened to his story for nearly an hour. In that hour, I learned he had gone to Sunday School all his life. It sounded like he had never missed a worship service at the church he attended since childhood. I learned about every good deed he had ever done. He told me about each mission trip he had participated in and any reason for not attending other mission trips. He talked about all the committees he served on in the church's life. I learned how many times he had read the Bible and how often he prayed each day. I learned a lot about this man. What I never once heard mentioned in nearly an hour was Jesus. This man came to share his Christian testimony with me never mentioned Christ.

Reflecting on that incident some years later, I remembered an image of John the Baptist. Not what comes to our minds as we read the gospel accounts of John eating bugs and preaching in the desert but the image in the painting of the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald. In this scene, John stands pointing to Jesus on the cross. In the painting, John's arm extended towards Jesus is disproportionate. This arm is larger than the other features of John's body. As the arm stretches out and your attention is drawn towards Jesus, the finger pointing to Jesus grows longer than John's other fingers. The painting captures John's description of his mission as a witness to the light. Last week, we heard that description of him from the beginning of John's Gospel.

Our current sermon series is about seeing faith in a new light. Last week, we heard about Jesus, the light of all people. Today, we focus on John as the example of what it means to witness to the light. Our gospel reading for today tells us how John carried out this mission of witnessing to the light. The reading is from John 1:24-34:

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are

neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³²And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

We do not know exactly where John's practice of baptism comes from. Most likely, it developed out of Jewish cleansing practices. After touching something unclean or in preparation for entering the Temple, worshippers participated in specific hand or foot washings to reenter the community or go into the Temple. By the time of John, it seems some converts to Judaism were encouraged to be washed entirely as a sign of entrance into the Jewish community.

But John was baptizing people who were already Jewish, descendants of Abraham. He encourages them to be washed. John's practice seems to be a new thing. Midway through our scripture reading, we are told that John is across the Jordan at Bethany. John is in modern-day Jordan. He is on the side of the Jordan River from which the Israelites first entered the promised land after escaping from Egypt. They came across the Jordan as

God caused the river to stop flowing, so the people walked across. Some people think that John was reenacting the entry into the promised land, calling the Israelites to reenter the land renewed, cleansed, baptized.

John's actions created as much speculation in his day as it creates among biblical scholars today. John is attracting large crowds. Religious authorities from Jerusalem heard rumors of what John was doing and sent a delegation across the Judean desert, across the Jordan River, to where John was baptizing. They come asking the question, "Who are you?"

These interrogators come with some possible answers. They ask if John is the Messiah, the promised one who will restore the glory of Israel like it was in the days of King David. Many expected such a figure to overthrow the Romans and establish a kingdom of justice and true worship of God. John says, "No, I am not the Messiah."

Others thought that before the Messiah arrived, Elijah would return to prepare the way for the Messiah. In 2 Kings, we read that Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot and did not die. Many thought this was so that Elijah could return just before the Messiah. The authorities from Jerusalem ask John, "Are you Elijah?" John says, "No, I am not."

Going back to the days of Moses and the book of Deuteronomy, just before Moses died, God had promised to send a prophet like Moses one day. Many expected this prophet to either be the Messiah or one to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. Finally, this examination group asks, "John, is this who you are." John says, "No."

In exasperation, John's interrogators ask, "Then why are you baptizing if you are none of these figures? Who are you?" John responds by saying, "You're missing the point. It's not about me. It's not even about what I am doing. I'm just baptizing with water, but someone is coming, someone among us now, who will baptize with the Spirit. What I am doing is to bring that person to light." John came as a witness to the light.

This interaction between John and the religious authorities is much like a trial. The authorities are examining John about who he is and what he is doing.

John takes the position that he is not on trial. John identifies as a witness. The next day, he sees Jesus and says, "Here is the one I told you about. He is the one who will baptize with the Spirit. And I came to bear this testimony."

In this examination with the religious authorities, we see John straining to get to this testimony. In his response to each inquiry about his identity, John gives shorter and shorter responses. We can sense his growing frustration. John has no desire to defend or define himself. John is anxious to reach his purpose, bearing witness to Christ and pointing others to him.

Even though John is known far and wide for baptism, even though this practice generates so much curiosity that representatives from the Temple in Jerusalem cross the desert to question John about what he is doing, John dismisses his practice as a mere pointer to a more significant baptism by a greater agent, a baptism with the Spirit. We can see the hand of John grow larger and his finger stretching to draw everyone's attention to Jesus.

Witness and testimony are the words John uses for himself and his actions. Behind these two words is one word in the Greek text *marturia*. Our word martyr comes from this Greek term. When we hear the word martyr today we often think of someone who suffers death for some cause. Its original meaning is to witness. But John, the great witness, does show us that there is an element of denying self, of taking the focus off us, a dying to self that is a part of any Christian witness.

To be a witness is to see something and to speak about what one has seen. Jesus appears for the first time and does not do or say anything. It is so that John can witness to him. John points to him and calls out, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

John says that he did not discover this. It was not something he figured out. It was shown to him. John doesn't create his testimony; even his witness results from God's work. This is what John shares, "I saw the Spirit descend and rest with him." The Spirit descending and resting on Jesus leads John to confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

This Jesus on whom the Spirit rests changes baptism. He is now the one who baptizes with the Spirit. He is the greater one, who brings the greater baptism. This witness has been passed down from John through the

centuries for us. Because of what was shown to John and the testimony he shared, we believe that baptism has been forever changed.

Now, when someone is baptized, more is happening than we can see with our unaided eyes. That Spirit that descended on Jesus, the Son of God, descends on the waters of baptism, claiming the one named as one of God's children. These authorities questioning John about his baptism and his identity were on to something. There is a connection between baptism and identity. What they could not see is that baptism confirms our identity as God's children.

Too often, even our discussion of baptism focuses too much on us. We debate about what age the person being baptized should be. We argue about what amount of water should be used in baptism. What is often overlooked or forgotten is what God does in baptism, claiming us as God's children.

John testified that this Jesus on whom the Spirit rests takes away the sin of the world. Earlier this sin was called the darkness that causes or vision to be distorted, we do not see God's intent, God's purpose for us and creation. Baptism calls us back to God's plan for us.

Today, as we remember the baptism of Jesus and the witness of John, we are invited to remember our baptism as part of that baptism in the Spirit. Last week, we heard that the Son of God came to us in Jesus so we might learn that we are God's children. Whether we were baptized as infants and have no actual recall of our baptism or if we were baptized last week, chances are between that day and this, there have been moments when we lost sight of that claim. Today, I invite you to remember God's claim on you through baptism.

Remember your baptism as a witness to God's claim on your life, and be thankful.



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