

Bearing Witness Like John the Baptist

Bible Verses Referenced: Isaiah 40:3, Genesis 3:5, John 14:6

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we are so grateful for the gift of Your Word. And on this day, we ask that You would pour out Your Holy Spirit in our hearts and our minds and illumine them. May the preaching of Your Word be Your Word, for the sake and glory of Your Son, Jesus, in His name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. This is the third Sunday of Advent, which sometimes is known as Stir It Up Sunday.

The reason for that is because in the Collect, it says, "Stir up your power, Lord." And the Lord is going to stir us up through the gift of His Holy Spirit working in our hearts. And in that way, we hear again about John the Baptist. All through the season of Advent, John the Baptist is looming large as the one who is the forerunner that points ahead to the person of Jesus.

One of the great theologians of our prior century, Karl Barth. Protestant theologian wrote Church Dogmatics and a famous commentary on the Book of Romans, very prolific writer. He would have a picture of John the Baptist in his study. And if you ever see John the Baptist in paintings, he always looks like this. And then somewhere in the painting is Jesus.

John the Baptist is the one who points. And he is always pointing away from Himself. And all the other gospels, you read all kinds of various things about John the Baptist, you know, how he was dressed in camel hair cloak and what he loved to eat was honey and wild locusts. I can just picture him looking kind of strange with Locust legs hanging out of his teeth.

But John, in his gospel, doesn't mention his clothing or what he ate, but he describes him primarily as one who gives testimony. He's a pointer. He points away from Himself and gives glory to the one who is to come, Jesus. Now, I want to reflect with us today about what does it mean to bear witness and to give a testimony.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The Greek word for being a witness is a word that you know. It means martyr. It's the Greek word martyr.

And the reason why it came to be associated with dying for your beliefs is because those who were the first followers of Jesus Christ who gave testimony to him gave testimony with their very lives. They were all martyred in the sense of they were willing to die for what they were and who they were pointing to.

John the Baptist, the first disciple of Jesus, the first witness of Jesus, was also the first martyr of Jesus who would give up his life by giving up his head to King Herod because he would not back down. He knew the one to whom he was pointing and he would give his life for him. So what are some characteristics of John as one who is a bearer of testimony?

Well, the first point is that he is not the source. John is not the one. He knows that Jesus is the one. John says, "He came as a witness to testify to the light that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light." That's very much emphasized in the gospel as these representatives from the priests and Levites come to John and they ask him, "Who are you?" And an increasing level of seeming frustration and curtain as John says, "I am not the Messiah." Well, then who are you then?

Are you Elijah? I am not. Well, then are you the prophet? No. You can imagine John being very frustrated with them because he is not the person of interest or significance, but he was pointing to the one who was. He is the Messiah. He is the one that you need to be putting your attention and focus on.

I love the famous book that was written by a Baptist minister. Is it okay to quote Baptist in Episcopal Church? I mentioned the Presbyterian with Karl Barth. It's a very ecumenical day. But Rick Warren wrote this wonderful book called The Purpose Driven Life. Did anybody read that one? One of the first lines in the purpose-driven life is it's not about you.

And that's part of what John the Baptist is teaching us in his testimony, that we are not the source. This was the big problem in the fall as Adam and Eve were tempted by the evil one, Satan, and he said to them, "If you partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be what?

Like God." And this is the big exchange that human beings made in their thinking and in their brains is that they exchanged themselves for God and made ourselves out to be the source of life and light. Now, how has that gone for us? Not well. And one of the calls and the testimonies and the witness of the Christian life is to point away from self and towards the one who is the light, who is the source of life.

And when we do that, things begin to work in their proper place and order. I mean, what else or who else is the answer to all of life's problems? You have a problem in your marriage? What do you need? More self? No. You need Jesus at the center of your marriage.

Whenever I have a couple that are presenting to me with marital problems, I'm not leading them to myself as their answer or to encourage them to be any more selfish in their marriage. That won't work. What they need to help their marital challenges and difficulties is to get God back at the center of their lives. Or think of a person who is having vocational challenges or problems. Do they need to be more self-centered in their pursuits?

Of course not. But to put the Lord's vocation as first in their life to find their significance and their purpose and their meaning. He is the source of our light in life, and when we get that teaching and understanding correct, everything starts to work itself out. Secondly, John the Baptist in his testimony teaches us that we are not the judge.

These people that are coming to Him challenging Him, these Pharisees, leaders from the temple courts and priests. They're awful judgy, aren't they? The way that they come at them, they say, "You tell us who you are," as if they're the boss of everybody, and that they are going to be the judges of whether this is messianic or eschatological or of theological import or not. And John doesn't have any part of it.

He will not be judged by them. And he understands who is the judge, the one who is coming. I love the children's story by Max Lucado called "You Are Specials." Anybody read that one? It's a great, great book. It's about these little wooden people called the Wimox. The whimaks have a little village that they walk around in and they interact with each other.

And the Whimmicks got into a really bad pattern of giving each other either golden star stickers or little gray dots. So, if you were a particularly nice swimmick, like you had fair wooden skin and no chips, and you were very pretty, or you were able to do things like jump over things or lift up heavy sticks. Other whims would come along and they'd give you a gold star.

Now, if you weren't particularly good at things, or maybe you might have chips on your wooden face or something like that, the other whimex would give you an ugly gray dot. This is the other consequence of the fall, isn't it? That we become judgy, that we become the arbiters of what good and evil are. We make the rules, and we get to decide whether somebody is worthy of a gold star or a gray dot.

And so the Wimmix would go around giving each other gold stars and gray dots, and they were covered with them, all of them. And there was this poor little wooden guy named Punchaletto. Punchinello, I'm sorry, Punchinello. And he was covered with gray dots. And he just could never jump high enough. And every time he tried to jump, he would fall and he'd chip himself again and he'd get another gray dot because he tripped and had chips.

One day, Punchinello came across this other whimek named Lucia, and she had no stickers on her at all. None at all. And he was like, "Lucia, how do you have no stickers? You don't have any stars or dots." She says, "Well, that's because I always go and see Eli, the wood carver, and I spend time with him every day." And so she invited Panchanello to go and visit Eli's, which he eventually got up the courage to do, and he got in there and it was very big, and there was gigantic furniture.

And then there he says the wood carver, and he hears a booming voice, "Punchanello? You know my name?" "Well, of course I do. I made you." He picked him up and he looked at him and he says, "Wow,

the other womens haven't been too kind to you, have they?" He said, "But you shouldn't care what they think about you.

The only important thing is what I think about you." He says, "You're special to me." He puts Punchinello down. Now, Punchinello had a hard time believing that because he had spent a lot of his time being judged by others. But as he was walking out the door of Eli's place, Eli says, "Come back again.

I want you here as much as you want to be here." And he thought to himself, "You know, I think he really meant that." And all of a sudden, one of those gray dots falls to the ground. You know, the Lord is our judge. He's the one that determines what is good and what is evil. He makes the rules. And life doesn't work well when we're the source or we're the judge. We have things upside down.

And what John the Baptist is doing is pointing the way to the One who is. I love the way Archbishop Temple put it. It's not who John the Baptist is, not who He is, but what He says that matters. He is merely a voice. Herein already is the great contrast between Him and the Lord. John says, "Never mind who I am.

Listen to what I say." Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." What John was doing was introducing us to not just an idea or something that will revolutionize our life, but to the one who made us, who alone will be the judge of our soul, and who speaks a better word, and calls us into personal relationship with himself.

John the Baptist wasn't calling people into relationship with himself. He was pointing people to relationship with Jesus. One beggar showing another beggar where the bread is. And so, the last point here is one of humility. And that's what John the Baptist models for us. As a person who is a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, understands a humble place.

He says to those who were judging him, "One comes after me the thong of whose sandal, I'm not worthy to untie." Now, a disciple would do pretty much anything for his rabbi, but most disciples wouldn't even stoop to untie their rabbi's shoe. That would be a push too far.

But what John the Baptist says is, "Not only am I willing to untie his shoe, I'm actually not worthy to do it." That's humility. John the Baptist would say of Jesus, "I must decrease so that He must increase." That's the call of one who is a witness to the Lord Jesus and one who bears testimony.

John models that as one who should be emulated by us all. The point is not to draw people to ourselves. No, there's plenty of that going on in the world, but to point to the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.