

An Advent Witness

In the first chapter of his gospel, John portrays in his prologue the significance of Christ's incarnation, his comments about the witness if John the Baptist seems almost an interruption; but obviously John has something important to say. I'll read **John 1:1-9**, focusing on verses **6-9**.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. This is the word of the Lord.

Perhaps as at no other time of the year, Advent is an exceptionally advantageous time to witness to family, friends and associates as we share the meaning of the Christmas celebration.

Years ago, while serving a church in Wichita, Kansas, a public school elementary music teacher in our church read a little book about the historical events of Christmas (an approach to "the Bible as history") to her public school elementary music classes in the US. She was summarily informed by one of her second graders, whose parents might have belonged to the American Civil Liberties Union, or the Freedom from Religion Foundation, that she wasn't supposed to talk about Jesus in school. She replied that she was telling them that the history of Christmas is centered in the birth of Jesus. When she taught about other national holidays, like Thanksgiving, she told about Governor Bradford, so when she taught about Christmas she told about Jesus. She taught about Jesus at Christmas just as she taught about the presidents on Presidents Day. In other words, Christmas is fairly meaningless apart from at least the mention of Jesus. As followers of Christ, it's appropriate to talk about him at Christmas.

John the Evangelist tells us about the role of John the Baptist as a witness to Christ. The word and concept used in the Gospel of John for witness runs throughout the book. "Witness" is used 14 times in the noun form and 33 times as a verb. Our text tells us this forerunner of Jesus, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was a bridge between the Old and the New Covenant (Testaments). John the Baptist/Baptizer was a man whose diet consisted of locusts and wild honey and who preached a message of judgment and the call to repentance in the desert wilderness. His unusual, counter-cultural lifestyle is an indication he may have belonged to the prophetic Qumran community.

Regardless of any eccentricities, John the Baptist models for us the life and ministry of an authentic witness in contrast to the many false witnesses of his day. Instead of being called John the Baptizer, a more accurate moniker would be John the Witness.

An authentic witness is a mortal human being, created by God in his image. John the Baptist was a unique personality for certain! And God has created you and me in our distinctiveness for his pleasure and glory. Never despise what God has created, and trust that he is continuing to complete his creation in you as he shapes your character into his likeness. God has created us to reflect his glory.

John the Baptist was one who was sent from God, which means he had a personal relationship with God. He could point others to God because he himself knew him and not just about him.

I know a man who's retired from ministry, living in North Kansas City, Missouri. His job now is with a travel agency, and he specializes in travel to Australia. I asked Wendell about Australia, since this is a place I've never visited. He confessed he hasn't been there either. He's in somewhat of a professional dilemma. Evidently he has to sell a number of trips to Australia before he can earn his own trip to the Land Down Under. I would think he's at a distinct disadvantage of having to sell folks on a place he has never been himself (I wonder till this day if he's ever made his first trip to Australia!).

Of course, an authentic witness to Jesus Christ is someone who knows Jesus personally, and is sent from him to tell others about that relationship. How can you lead someone else to go where you haven't been yourself? An authentic witness is one who can relate a fresh experience with God. Inquirers want to know the difference a relationship with Jesus makes in your life today. They want to know what he has done for you lately.

Jesus told his enemies about the greatness of John the Baptist, and how they refused to repent at his powerful preaching. He said, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John;" Jesus added some amazing words that should humble each one of us: "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk. 7:28). John the Baptist was Jesus' forerunner and the link between the Old and the New Covenants. We're privileged to belong to the New Covenant and to live this side of the resurrection of Jesus. We're also this side of Pentecost, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We're able to live our entire lives in the full measure of the Holy Spirit, and are part of the eternal Kingdom through the church of the risen Lord.

We should live as authentic witnesses, daily led by the Holy Spirit. We belong to the powers of the New Age of the living Christ. Every morning when you step outside your house, you should live as one sent from God, with the incredible privilege of representing him and giving a witness for him. Through Jesus-shaped lives of love, and obedience, and by our words about Jesus, God will work through us even in ways beyond the work of John the Baptist. We're allowed to introduce people to the power of the completed work of Jesus. We join God in his work of drawing people to himself. God wants to empower us that we might become his witnesses he's selected and is sending as missional people in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As one has said, these words describing the appointment of John the Baptist as "sent from God" are "exalted terms," which are used of Jesus in (16:27) and of the

Holy Spirit (15:26). You and I too are chosen and called to this exalted position as a witness and an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

One book I recall reading in high school was *The Ugly American*, about American diplomats and other US officials in Southeast Asia, whose self-indulgent and culturally insensitive lifestyle and character brought disgrace to our country at a critical time in our relationship with Southeast Asia. And there have been and are plenty of “ugly ambassadors for Christ,” who bring discredit and make a negative image before the watching world.

You and I are created, chosen and sent on a high mission as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20) that no one else can fill. We must approach our task as witnesses with humble dependence on God’s power to enable us to be his best representatives to those to whom God is sending us in our unique spheres of influence, with family, friends, colleagues and fellow students.

Our text is clear that John the Baptist was subordinate to Jesus, the true Light (8). This attitude of humility is seen particularly where John states his subordinate relationship to Jesus:

“He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn. 3:30).

Jesus himself, speaking about John the Baptist, said, “John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light” (Jn. 5:35). Jesus said John had a role to point others to him who is the true Light.

As the Apostle Paul said, we too, unlike the “superstars” who denigrated Paul and his leadership, are to say that Christ is our life, and to live is Christ (Phil. 1:21). Jesus is the Light of the world, and we’re called to be lights in the world (Matt. 5:14), but like John the Baptist, our light is derived from and dependent on the true Light of the World (Jn. 8:12).

Our world doesn’t want to see people who have all the answers in themselves. Our world needs to see ordinary, struggling people who’re learning to trust a great God. Your world around you needs to see in your life an authentically dependent person who is learning to trust an almighty, loving, and faithful God. They need to see that you, like John the Baptist, are under the Lordship of Christ.

I’m seeking to be a faithful witness to those in my traffic patterns of ordinary, daily life. If I’m not having a particularly wonderful day, when someone asks me “how’re ya doin’?” should I say the word that’s become a cliché, “perfect”? Maybe they need to hear an honest word, to know I share the coming struggles and ups and downs of life. I need to be real with them, but also relate that God is my strength.

Although not above common struggles and failures, an authentic witness is one who has a sense of responsibility for others, and realizes this is a personal, irreplaceable task. It’s lifelong and non-negotiable. Our text says that John the Baptist “came as a witness....” And we know he died violently as a martyr after his faithful ministry was completed (Matt. 14:1-12).

The word in our text for witness is “martureo.” From that word we get the English word, “martyr,” which means one who dies for his/her faith. The early witnesses were so faithful to Christ they were willing to die for their faith, and often did. Thus the word for witness became synonymous with one who dies for her or his faith, as would John the Baptist, who was an authentic witness.

God has called every one of us to be a missional Christian, which is one who is on mission to take Christ out into the world, instead of trying to bring the lost into the church or simply sending others to the mission field. Our focus is not just to disseminate information about Christ, but to do whatever it takes, in the power, wisdom and love of the Spirit, to lead them to faith in Christ.

Being a faithful witness, as John the Baptist knew, requires the grace of God and the anointing of the Spirit in our lives. Your witness requires the divine power of God to sustain you and to encourage you, especially when it seems your witness is spurned and ineffective. Your part is to be faithful. John the Baptist was faithful to fulfill his calling. Even though his life ending in a violent martyrdom, he had finished the work that God had appointed him to do. And this is all that the Lord requires of you—to be faithful, whether or not your witness appears to be immediately successful.

In this Gospel of John we have a summary of the effectiveness and fruitfulness of John the Baptist’s witness. He had prepared the way for the Lord through preparing the hearts of many people to come to Jesus (10:40-42). Like John the Baptist, you may not live to see all the fruit of your life, but in eternity you’ll realize that God honored your faithful witness to family, friends and those you have perhaps long forgotten.

A witness has to take a stand, and cannot remain neutral. The language John the Evangelist uses for John the Baptist is “courtroom language.” If you take your stand in the witness box and testify that such-and-such is the truth of the matter, you’re no longer neutral. You’ve committed yourself. Just as a witness in a courtroom cannot remain silent, and that the life of the defendant might depend on us, so we must be faithful, bold witnesses for Christ in behalf of those under condemnation.

Let’s ask the Lord God to make us aware of unique opportunities to share Christ this Advent Season, perhaps by inviting guests to our home and seeing symbolic Christmas decorations and hearing from us the message of Christ’s birth. It’s perfectly legal in this country to talk about Jesus in your home! And we have better news than you read about in the papers or hear in the countless ads on television.

Effective witnessing is done through one-on-one relationships. And in our increasingly secular culture (including increasingly secular holidays!), relationships are perhaps the only way of reaching the unconverted and unchurched, who aren’t likely to visit our worship services.

Brian Harbour tells about Palmer Ofuoku, although not a Christian, was placed in a mission school in Nigeria because his parents knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet remained an adherent of a traditional African religion. One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer, and

eventually led this young Nigerian to Christ. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary's influence, saying "He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across."

We are God's Advent witnesses, called to build bridges of friendship to those we know and are yet to meet. As we do so, Jesus will walk across.