

Preparing the Way of the Lord: An Advent Witness

From Mark's Gospel, we read about the work of John the Baptist, whose fiery preaching in the wilderness served to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. In the first chapter of his gospel, John portrays the significance of Christ's incarnation and the witness of John the Baptist. I'll read **Mark 1:1-8 and John 1:6-9**

Mark 1:1-8: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

² *As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

³ *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,"

⁴ *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

John 1:6-9: *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.*

Since becoming a Presbyterian preacher, I have a new understanding of Advent. I had always thought of these four Sundays before December 25 as a runner-up to Christmas Day, focusing each Sunday on a bit more of Jesus' birth story. Advent was an extension of Christmas celebrations, during an ever-increasing season of Christmas music, TV specials, and of course, intensified shopping for family and friends. But looking at the church's lectionary, and reading up on the original intent of Advent, a word that's translated as "coming," I know now that Advent originated as a season to focus on the Second Coming of Christ, bringing judgment as well as completed deliverance for his people. This understanding of Advent isn't likely to spawn the kind of music you hear playing incessantly in Christmas-decorated shopping malls.

John's calling was to prepare the way for the first appearing of Jesus, who would bring rescue and life to all who were in the throes of sin and death. Jesus came to announce his kingdom, calling all to receive him as King and join in the work of seeking the fulfillment of his kingdom and his will being done, on earth as it is in heaven. Christ came to confront sin, death and the devil head-on, accomplishing our rescue through his suffering and death on the cross. For John the Baptist, preparing for Jesus meant calling to repentance and a turning from self-centered ways to a life that obeys, loves and honors Christ, and serves his kingdom.

Luke's gospel quotes John the Baptist calling for "fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8), and when the congregation asked what they should do, John gave practical directions that would express true repentance, such as if you have two coats, give away one, and feed the hungry and be honest and contented (10-14).

Fleming Rutledge, commented on John's call to repentance, asking, "Who is getting ready for Christmas?" She reported on a 1996 NBC News story "about the big retail season. A woman was interviewed standing in the aisles of (a high end New York toy store) with her children. She said, 'We are going to be able to spend about \$1,500 more this year' (1996!). Is that the way to get ready for Christmas?" Rutledge asks. She continues, "I think of...several couples I know, who this very week are sitting down together to plan the year-end gifts they will give to worthy causes instead of lavish presents. Who is getting ready for Christmas," asks Rutledge, "the woman in the store, or the couples with their budgets and their lists of charities?" She concludes with a quote from John the Baptist: "Bear fruits that befit repentance" (Matt. 3:8).

Advent prepares us to celebrate the birth of Christ, because we're ready to face his second coming, which we need not fear because we've received his saving grace, and are experiencing his love and expressing our repentance. As God's being-remade children, we're then called to join John as witnesses, as repentant and being-remade children of God.

John the Evangelist tells us about the role of 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 was a man whose diet consisted of locusts and wild honey and who preached a message of judgment and issued the call to repentance in the desert wilderness.

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. 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 the Lord 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 created, chosen and called to this exalted position as a witness and an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), an assignment 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 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 realize 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 his 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. People need to see other 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.

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 ended 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've perhaps long forgotten.

A study leave a few years ago was an opportunity for me to reflect on my ministry as your pastor, and one of the more challenging books was about John the Baptist as a model for preachers, as one who faithfully "prepared a people for the presence of the Lord" by focusing on the saving message of Christ (David Rohrer). One thing the writer failed to mention is that John's ministry concluded with his being beheaded by King Herod. I hope my ministry doesn't end with my losing my head! (I do know what it is to be cut off from a ministry to a particular church after 19, what I trust were faithful, years of service). But I nevertheless pray I will faithfully help prepare you to meet the Lord.

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.

Four years ago, our nation remembered and honored the good life of our 41st President, George H W Bush. As his son, George H Bush, eulogized his father, he reminded us of his father's reference in his inaugural address to all the service and charitable organizations as "a thousand points of light," that would be beacons of hope to those in need. John the Evangelist says Jesus, not John the Baptist, was the true Light. You and I are called as witnesses to the Light, to be one of God's points of light. As God's love shines through your faithful, compassionate, self-giving life, you and I become one of God's many points of light. And the light from your life can't be replaced by anyone else.

May we thereby prepare the way of the Lord as his witnesses.