

# THE WITNESS

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Third Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 17, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 1, verses 6 through 8 and 19-28. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 1, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

<sup>19</sup>And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup>He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." <sup>22</sup>So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup>He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

<sup>24</sup>(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) <sup>25</sup>They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" <sup>26</sup>John answered them, "I baptize with water, ~~but~~ among you stands one you do not know, <sup>27</sup>even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." <sup>28</sup>These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Christ is coming. Repent.

This was the message of John the Baptist. And it is still the message of the Christian Church. I suppose the only difference is that instead of saying that he is coming, we now say, "The Christ has come, and he is coming again. So repent."

To repent simply means that we confess our sins and believe God's promise of forgiveness. Repentance does not mean that we change ourselves in order to earn God's favor. If you've ever tried to do that, you have hopefully learned the truth that you cannot. It doesn't work.

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During the season of Advent, one of the main characters in the Gospel lessons is John the Baptist. We also would have heard about him last week if not for the Christmas program.

A little bit about John: First, this is not the same John who wrote *The Gospel of John*. I know this can be a little confusing. There are several Johns in the Bible. The John who wrote *The Gospel of John* was one of Jesus' twelve apostles. But John the Baptist is a different guy. He was actually a cousin of some sort to Jesus. John's mother Elizabeth was a relative of Mary the mother of Jesus.

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The other thing that can be a little confusing is his title “the Baptist.” It does not mean that he was a member of the Baptist denomination. The denomination didn’t arise until the 1600s. He’s called “the Baptist,” because he baptized people. So sometimes, in order to avoid that confusion, we call him “John the Baptizer.” If John were around today, I think he would fit in with the Lutherans. Probably every denomination thinks that John would be one of them, because every denomination thinks they are right, otherwise they wouldn’t believe what they believe. But there are a few distinctives about John that just seem very Lutheran. First of all, he’s constantly talking about Jesus. The whole point of his ministry was to point to Jesus. Every sermon was about the Christ. Second, he was constantly preaching Law and Gospel. Another way to say that is that he was preaching repentance. He was preaching the Law to people, so that they would know their sin. And he was preaching the Gospel, promising forgiveness in the Christ whom he was about to reveal. Third, and this is the clincher in my mind, John taught that Baptism forgives sins. Both Mark and Luke, in their gospels, say that John appeared “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). My point isn’t really to say that if John were alive today, he would follow the Lutherans. Rather, I mean that we try to follow the pattern of his ministry, which is also the ministry that Jesus continued in.

John said, “I baptize with water; among you stands one you do not know” (1:26). Most English Bibles add a word in there that doesn’t belong. They add the word “but.” So it reads, “I baptize with water, *but* among you stands one you do not know.” It makes it sound like there is a contrast between John’s Baptism and the coming of Jesus. That’s not true at all. Instead, there is a great connection between John’s Baptism and the coming of Jesus. John baptized because Jesus was coming. He baptized, “telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus” (Acts 19:4). John baptized people, then Jesus took over baptizing people (John 3:22; 4:1), and we continue to baptize people, because it delivers to us the gifts Jesus earned by his death and resurrection.

So that’s who John was. He preached repentance, he baptized people for the forgiveness of sins, and he told them to believe in the Christ, whom he was about to revealed.

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Some people loved John, and some people hated him. Why? It kind of depended on who you were, what class you came from, and what you thought of yourself. The upper class, that is, the leaders of the Jews, generally did not like John. I’m talking about the religious leaders, like the rabbis and priests. At this time, Israel was governed by the Roman Empire, so they didn’t have any of their own political leaders to look up to, so the religious leaders were the Jewish elites. And, generally speaking, they did not like John. Not surprisingly, they also did not like Jesus, since Jesus came preaching the same thing.

But the common people did like John.

Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, so this was well after John had been killed, Jesus asked a challenge question to the religious leaders. He asked them if the baptism of John was from heaven or from man. And they didn’t know how to answer. They wanted to say, “From man,” but they were afraid of the people, for they all held John to be a prophet (Matt. 21:23-27). So we see that most of the rabbis and priests did not like John, but most of the common people did.

Why? It seems ironic. The religious leaders should know enough to recognize John as a prophet and Jesus as the Christ. So it seems ironic that the common people would see and accept these things, while most of the religious leaders did not. Why?

I want to think about this a little bit with you. Some people suggest that we shouldn’t be too religious. They say, “It was the religious people who missed Jesus. They took their religion too

seriously. They were too rigid in their doctrine, so they didn't have room for Jesus." These are the people who would also say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." No. The problem with the leaders of the Jews was not that they were too religious. The problem was that their religion was wrong.

Nearly all of the Jews were far more religious than most Christians are today. We're talking about people who would walk to Jerusalem for feasts such as the Passover. For Jews living in the northern region of Galilee, it was about a ninety-mile walk. And they might make the trip three times a year for the major feasts, as well as for other occasions, like to make a sacrifice after giving birth to a child. Imagine if, forty days after giving birth, your religion required you to walk ninety miles to go make a sacrifice. We would consider that extreme by today's standards. That was normal for a first-century Jew. So the common Jew was very religious, and they held John to be a prophet. Clearly, being religious does not get in the way of faith. The problem with the leaders of the Jews was not that they were too religious. It's that their religion was bad. And I don't mean that the Judaism taught in the Old Testament was bad. The doctrine of the Old Testament is right. But the leaders of the Jews didn't believe it.

There is a certain temptation that comes with authority or respect. It's a temptation to think of ourselves as better than we really are. But the message of John was humbling. And for the proud, being humbled is more like being humiliated.

If you do a little survey of John's ministry across the four gospels, you will see that John was very much a Law and Gospel preacher. And both the Law and the Gospel are offensive to the proud. The Law offends our sense of righteousness, while the Gospel offends our sense of freedom.

Let's start with the Law. The Law tells us that we are not right. It reveals to us that we are born sinful, and that we continue to commit sins. We agree with the Law's condemnation of us when we confess "that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed." When you stop and think about it, that's really offensive. But we might recite that confession without thinking about it very much. So I want you to think to yourself, *What, exactly, am I talking about when I say that I have "sinned against you in thought, word, and deed"?* If you can't come up with anything, do you really mean that confession?

And let's take it a step further. What if someone called you out on some specific sin? What if your husband or wife, or a parent, or I as your pastor, or some other member of our church said to you, "You know, I think you have a sinful attitude about such and such," or, "When you said or did such and such, I think that was wrong. And I think you should repent"? How would you react to that? Would you thoughtfully receive such a rebuke? Would you argue back? Would you just leave? It's one thing to make a general confession, like we do when we confess our sins together in worship. It's another thing to name specific sins. When we make a general confession of sin, we can treat it like it's merely theoretical. But we don't commit theoretical sins, and God doesn't forgive theoretical sins. We commit real sins, and God forgives real sins. So if you made that general confession of sin earlier this morning, but then later today, someone rebukes you for a specific sin, if you scoff at their rebuke, what were you even talking about when you made the general confession?

Now, it's possible that the person who rebukes you could be wrong. They're probably not, because people are generally careful about doing such things. They don't want to offend you. But it's possible they could be mistaken. But if they are mistaken, then what sin could they rebuke you for? What sin could they call out in you, and you say, "Yeah, you're right"? We

should be able to answer that question. I know there's something there, because there's something there for all of us.

I'll admit that I'm doing a little bit of advance preparation for myself, not with any one person in mind, but, potentially, with any of you. Occasionally pastors have to confront a person about some specific sin. I hate doing it. It's terrifying. But sometimes I have to. Sometimes it goes well, and sometimes it doesn't. Other pastors say the same thing. When it goes well, it's amazing ... for everyone. But it doesn't always go well. I want it to go well, not just for my sake, but especially for yours. I want you to experience the liberation of forgiveness. So I'm asking you now to think about how it might go if I, or another pastor you will have someday, comes to admonish you to repentance. Do you think you would scoff at it? Would you leave and go to a different church? Or would you receive it and repent?

I'll let you in on a secret. I try to employ what little wisdom I have when I do this. There's a proverb that says, "A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool" (Prov. 17:10). There are actually several proverbs about this. I have no interest in admonishing someone if I don't think they'll take it well. There's nothing to gain and a lot to lose. So if I come to you and tell you that you should repent of something, I'm doing it because I think you are wise enough to listen.

And the goal of this is always forgiveness. If you confess your sin, I am duty-bound to declare God's forgiveness to you. That's what I want you to experience. And, more importantly, that's what God desires to give you.

What, really, do you want from a church? Do you want a church and a pastor who tells you that you're okay and everything is okay? If that's what we do, then what's the point? What if your dentist was afraid to tell you that you have a cavity? What if your doctor was afraid to tell you that you have cancer? If all they tell you is good news, you might enjoy visiting them. They might make you feel good about yourself. But, eventually, your cavity is going to start to hurt, and the cancer is going to consume you. And you will eventually realize that visiting them is pointless. So also with church. We should all desire to have a church that deals with real sins with real forgiveness.

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John certainly did this. So the common people received the message of John. The leaders of the Jews had laid heavy burdens on them, burdens that they could not bear. So when John came along preaching against sin, they were not offended. They knew he was right. They knew they were not righteous enough to keep the Law. And when John preached the Gospel to them, they ate it up. When he invited them to Baptism in order to have their sins forgiven, they went, confessing their sins and receiving forgiveness.

But the leaders of the Jews rejected John. In the text for today we see them questioning John. In other passages we see more open hostility. They were offended by John, because they thought they were keeping the commandments. So John's preaching offended them when he revealed that they were not.

Even the preaching of the Gospel was offensive to them. The Gospel offends our sense of freedom. If we think that we are free, or if we think that we are strong enough to save ourselves, God's promise to save us offends our pride.

It's like if you're at the checkout line at the grocery store, and you don't have enough money. The Law is like the cashier telling you that you don't have enough. That's offensive. The Gospel is like the guy behind you in line who offers to pay for it. If you're too proud, that can be even

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more offensive. If you think that you do have enough, or if you're just unwilling to admit that you don't, his offer to pay will probably offend you.

That's how it is with the Gospel. If we know that we need God to save us, the Gospel is sweet. But if we think that we are good enough, or if we think that we don't need any saving, the Gospel really offends our pride.

So John preached the Law to get us past that, and he preached the Gospel, pointing us to Jesus our Savior.

When the leaders of the Jews questioned him about who he was and why he was baptizing, he was very clear about who he was not. He said, "I am not the Christ" (1:20). This is kind of strange. If someone asks you who you are, you probably don't answer by saying who you are not. But John says, "I am not the Christ," because he wants to get us thinking about who the Christ is. That is, who is the Messiah? Who is the person God promised long ago in the Old Testament? John did finally reveal that he is the messenger whom was sent to prepare the way for the Lord (1:23). That's why he preached, and that's why he baptized.

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Ultimately, this is all about forgiveness. That's what John's ministry was about. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was all about forgiveness. And the ministry of the Church is all about that forgiveness. When John called the people to repentance, and when God calls us to repentance, it's not to condemn us. If we are filled with pride, it might feel that way. But if we humbly accept God's call, we will see that it's really all about forgiveness. Think of those specific sins, the ones that you know you should be admonished for. Jesus died to forgive those sins. Those sins trap us and enslave us under death. But Jesus sets us free. When he died as an innocent victim, he broke the legal hold that death has on us for those sins. So listen to John, because he calls us to look to Jesus. There we find forgiveness and freedom through his death and resurrection. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.