

**Emmaus Lutheran Church**  
**Sermon on John 1:6–8; 19-28**  
**Dec. 13, 2020**

The Holy Gospel according to John.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

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

19 This is the testimony given by 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 it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for 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.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ <sup>26</sup>John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

If there was ever a time when we needed our Savior to show up, the time is now. Can I get a witness? No? If you’ve cocked one eyebrow up at your screen right now, I wouldn’t be surprised. I realize that that kind of call and response isn’t really part of the Emmaus church culture. In my three years of preaching here, I don’t think I’ve ever been interrupted by an enthusiastic “Amen.” But I want to ask the question again, because it is the central question of our text this morning. Not so much can *I* get a witness, of course, but can Jesus? Can the coming Son of God get a witness?

Our text today might seem like an odd passage for Advent. The first verses of the Gospel of John make for soaring poetry and profound theology, but if we tried to dramatize the Gospel of John like we normally do Matthew and Luke around this time of year, we would find ourselves with a very strange Christmas pageant. Can you imagine if we only had the Gospel of John? We would have no magi, no sheep or other cattle lowing, no gifts of gold, frankincense, or myrrh, no adorable four year-old angels or five-year-olds wearing bedsheets and sporting long gray beards. We would have to reduce our normal story of Christ’s birth to one line, perhaps against a black

velvet backdrop: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Not a bad line, but not quite enough for a full Christmas play.

Of course, given the reality of the pandemic, which would render a children's Christmas pageant no less cute but far more contagious than normal, perhaps it is all the better that what we have here this morning on this Third Sunday of Advent is one solitary character, the "one sent by God"—John. Like many of us who are without extended family or perhaps living alone, John is something of a lonely figure here in the Gospel of John.

John features at the beginning of all four gospels, but here his role is different. While he baptizes Jesus in Matthew and Mark and his baptizing ministry seems to lead to Jesus's baptism in Luke, in the Gospel according to John, this man we have come to know as "John the Baptist" might be more accurately called "John the Witness." For while he does not baptize Jesus in the Gospel of John, he does serve as a witness to him. If Jesus were to ask, "Can I get a witness," John would be the loudest and most zealous volunteer.

But, somewhat amazingly, whenever he is asked who he is, he spends more time saying who he is not.

"Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."  
"Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."

This, of course, does not seem like a particularly successful testimony. After all, most of the time when we think of witnessing, we think of someone proclaiming who Christ is or what God has done in the world, but here John is forced to spend more time deflecting and redirecting the attention of his questioners.

The point John seems to be making is simple but profound: this message I'm proclaiming is not about me. I'm not the point. The point, rather, is good news for all creation: God has been made flesh. John stands as a witness, someone who points away from himself to something else. He points, of course, to one of the most shocking claims of Christianity—that God entered into this mortal, fallible, earthly frame. The oddity of Christmas is sometimes lost on us, because our familiarity with the story has domesticated its wildness. For John's first audience, the idea that a Holy, Almighty God, the creator of the world who loved Israel but would not let even Moses see God's face, the idea that that God would come down and become human would have been shocking indeed. And John realized that this story was so big, so vital, so pivotal in human history that he had to bear witness to it. He had to point, beyond himself, to it. He was a witness.

There don't seem to be any particular instructions in the Bible regarding what it means to be witnesses. From prophets like John to people with leprosy to a woman at the well, we have many different examples of what it looks like to be a witness, but no blueprint. And yet, we too are called to be witnesses. So what are we to do or say?

I've seen some pretty creative and entertaining methods of witnessing in my day. I grew up in Abilene, TX, where you're just as likely to encounter a traffic jam in the church parking lot on Sunday as you are at "rush hour." Abilene might not seem like it would be the right place to do much witnessing. But a street minister I knew named Jose, who had been radically saved by God from a life of drugs and gangs, thought differently. Jose liked to go and pass out tracts, miniature pamphlets explaining the gospel message, at the night clubs. He reasoned that when he had been living a life of sin he had gone to the clubs, so everyone in the clubs must therefore be living a life of sin. Eager to help them, he devised all kinds of methods to reach them. He would sometimes stand with a sign that said "Repent! Jesus is Coming Soon!" Sometimes he would wheel out a coffin as a prop and ask, "If you died tonight, do you know where you would end up?" Inspired by Jose, I remember walking up to complete strangers and asking them about their relationship with Jesus. Were they believers? Did they know that Jesus loved them? As you can imagine, these methods got mixed responses and mixed reviews. At best, some people were reminded of their Christian upbringing or even had a conversion experience of their own, though that was somewhat rare. At worst, we came off as intolerant, self-righteous, and self-absorbed, and people rejected us and our message and came to associate God and Christianity with our particular, sometimes off-putting, evangelistic tactics. Instead of pointing beyond ourselves, we often ended up simply drawing attention to ourselves and our performative evangelistic tactics.

From what I've seen, Lutherans in Oregon don't seem to be given to these kinds of evangelistic displays. Not a single one of you has handed me a gospel tract and asked me if I know Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. And I would agree that now, especially in the midst of a pandemic, it's probably not the right time to wheel out coffins to the streets or ambush unsuspecting passersby with close-quarters conversation about the state of their soul.

And yet, we are still called to be witnesses. So what does it mean to be a witness on this third Sunday of Advent in the midst of a raging pandemic during a year in which we have had to completely rethink our concept of church, and social interaction, and for many, even grocery shopping—much less witnessing?

Witnessing, in its essence, is pointing beyond ourselves to the reality of God's love for the world. That's what John was trying to do, even though baptizing people in a river in the middle of a desert made prominent people wonder what was wrong with him. He was repeatedly questioned about his identity and his purpose, and he simply kept pointing beyond himself to the one who was coming. The church today is in a comparable situation. Our relevance, our identity, and our purpose are all being questioned, not just by secular critics, but sometimes by us within the church! Who are we? What are we doing here? Especially in the midst of a pandemic, what is our role? Should we be gathering? Should we not be?

The good news for us, as we try to figure out what it means to witness to the coming of Christ within the constraints of a pandemic that forces us inside, is that our call remains the same as John's was: we are called to point beyond ourselves to the one who is to come. Through radical generosity, we point beyond ourselves to where God's heart is. Through food drives aimed at meeting the growing hunger crisis in our community, we point beyond ourselves to God's heart for those in need. Through acts of service like sending school

supplies and quilts, we point beyond ourselves to God's heart for little ones and those without homes. Through our words of kindness and care and love for people we know, we point beyond ourselves to immense love of God made manifest in the Christmas story. By speaking truth in love, we point beyond ourselves to the coming of Christ.

The main story to which John points, the good news of Christ's intervention in our world, is that God is at work in us, shaping us, using us, and helping us to be witnesses to the most profound message of advent, the message that humanity has been visited, loved, and redeemed by the living Christ. In this way, we become miniature signs, pointing to the one who has come, who is in our midst, and who will come again. By being witnesses to God's love in the world, we point beyond ourselves to the one who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen.