

December 13, 2017 – Malachi 3:1-7b, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, John 1:6-9, 15

Why do we care about John the Baptist? It may seem like a silly question, but I think it bears consideration. Why do we care about him?

Why do we have a description of him in all four Gospels? Why do we get an account of his miraculous birth right along side of Jesus' own? Why do we have two different Old Testament prophecies of his coming, one of which we read earlier? Why do we have banners on our walls depicting him and quoting him?

Obviously, he's an important guy. Obviously, we should, indeed, take a moment and talk about this man who was sent by God. But... why?

That part isn't so obvious. Because the phrase we usually use to describe the purpose of John's coming is that he's the one who prepares the way for Jesus. *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”*

The thing is, though, those descriptions are kind of irrelevant to us. OK, so John prepared the way for Jesus. Then Jesus came. John's work was done. The end. It's an interesting historical note, but nothing more.

But there is more to John the Baptist than that. And John the Apostle helps us see that in our lesson today. Because there's a word used to describe John the Baptist that we see reappearing over and over again in this text.

*“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light... He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light... John bore witness about him...”*

Four times in just five verses we hear the word “witness.” John the Baptist is a witness. He bears witness about Jesus. In fact, this theme isn't confined to these few verses. Much of John's Gospel is about what it means to be a witness. The word occurs 28 times in this gospel. Far more than any other book. And 14 of those – half of them – are in reference to John the Baptist.

Which means if you want to know what it means to be a witness of Jesus Christ, if you want to know what it means to bear witness about Jesus' work, then there's one person you need to look at as an example: John the Baptist. He is the epitome, the essence, of what it means to be a witness.

And that's important. Especially for us today. Because that word – witness – gets thrown around a lot in churches. It's become part of our Christian jargon. We talk about witnessing opportunities. And having a good Christian witness. But rarely do we connect the term to that very first witness to Jesus we find in John the Baptist.

And, sometimes, I think we've lost what that word itself means. Because, at it's core, bearing witness is a legal term. It's what someone does in a courtroom during a trial. You are called to the stand as a witness.

And when you bear witness in court, the point of your testimony is not to talk about yourself. Exactly the opposite. You are called as a witness because you have something important to say about the victim. Or about the defendant. Or about the circumstances of an event. Or because you're an expert in the evidence presented.

Being a witness means, by definition, talking about someone other than yourself. And that is exactly what John did. In fact, that's exactly what the Apostle John emphasizes about John the Baptist over and over again.

We hear it today: *“He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light... He who*

*comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.*” We'll hear it again with another passage about John this coming Sunday. “Are you the Christ? No. Are you Elijah? No. Are you Isaiah? No. Then who are you?”

I'm nobody. That's what John essentially answers them. I'm nobody. I'm a guy on the witness stand, talking about someone else. Someone who is way more important than I am. Don't look at me. Look at him. I'm nothing. He's everything.

That's what it means to be a witness to Jesus Christ. To spend your life pointing to Jesus at every moment. Taking no credit for yourself. And giving all the glory to him.

And for that very reason, it's not always an easy task. It's a very selfless, humbling thing to be a witness. Our sinful nature constantly wants to draw attention to ourselves. It constantly tries to twist our witness about Jesus into a witness about ourselves.

A witness about our good decisions or our good church or our good family. We want our witness to make us popular and well liked and prosperous. We want to be everything that John the Baptist wasn't.

Because, truth be told, John was a weirdo. Living in the wilderness. Wearing animal skins. Eating locusts and honey. Dirty. Homeless. Unshaved and unkempt.

And his message didn't make him popular either. “You brood of vipers! God's gonna cut you down like a tree and burn you in the fire.” Not a great way to make friends, John. And telling King Herod that's he's a sinful adulterer? Not a very effective way to gain yourself power or influence or... you know... keep your head off a silver platter.

John's mission was never about looking good or making friends, being popular or rising to power. John's mission was to point to Jesus. To tell the world, “You are sinners who need to repent. But thanks be to God, the Savior is coming. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And his name is Jesus.”

Now, am I saying that we need to do what John did? Camp out in the Ozarks wearing deer skins, eating grasshoppers while we yell at politicians? No. Although that might be kind of fun.

What I am saying is that if we want to bear witness about the light like John the Baptist did, then it might involve rearranging our priorities. It might involve spending a little more time saying, “I am nobody. He is everything.”

It might involve becoming all things to all people that by all means we might save some. That's Paul's version of being a witness. Becoming all things to all people... and nothing to himself. With no ground at all for boasting. So that he can empty himself for the sake of the Gospel. And then share in its blessings.

You see that's the key. That's what kept John the Baptist going when Herod was cutting off his head. That's what kept John the Apostle going when he was exiled to a lump rock in the Mediterranean. That's what kept Paul going through years of imprisonment.

When you witness to Jesus, you witness to your own redemption. When you point to yourself, you point only to your sinfulness. To your own death and the grave. But when you point to Jesus, you point to His cross and His resurrection. To His forgiveness and His salvation.

You point to a God of love. Who condemns sin. But saves sinners. Like you and me. You point to a God who does not change, so we are not consumed. To a God who returns to us time and time again, even as he calls us to return to him in repentance.

Bearing witness to Jesus can be very hard. But it can also be very rewarding. Because when you bear witness to the light for others, the light shines on you as well. Amen.