

## Testifying to the Light

### John 1:6-8, 19-28

<sup>6</sup> 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....

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

My husband Leroy likes to watch old television shows about court and the justice system. He likes Perry Mason and Madlock; shows where a lawyer questions witnesses to get at the truth of a situation. He also likes "Murder She Wrote" and "In the Heat of the Night." These programs go about getting at the truth in a slightly different way – by looking at the circumstances surrounding each case as witnesses to find the truth. More recently are programs like "Cold Case," "CSI," and "Monk" – each find witnesses in the unlikeliest bit of evidence to piece together the truth. Each of these programs tell us more about the investigative process that help our legal system examine witnesses and arrive at truth. On this third Sunday of Advent our scripture points us again to John, who the Gospel of Mark taught us was the one who prepared the way for Jesus. Now, the Gospel of John says this same John was the witness that Jesus is God's Word to teach us God's ways and the Light of God's love.

Like those people sent to question John, we want to know who this John is, why he is doing what he does, and is he a witness we can believe. Our text focuses on the role of John, the witness sent by God to testify to Jesus as the light of the world, who is the eternal preexistence of the Word (*Logos*), who was present with God at creation, vv. 1-5; and the historical manifestation of the Word, who became human and walked the earth, v. 14. The testimony of John is about who Jesus is, and this testimony is consistent with two important foci of this Gospel: incarnation, Jesus as the human embodiment of God; and Jesus as the Christ.

In verses 6-8, we learn John is a man sent by God to witness in history to Jesus who was present with God at creation and who will be the eternal presence of God within history. However, John did not simply announce the coming of another prophet, but he proclaimed the coming of the Word who would embody God's presence within the world. The presence of this embodied God is described in a translation from the Aramaic: "And the word took human form and dwelt [tented] among us; and we saw his preciousness [glory], a preciousness like that of an only beloved son of the Father, who is filled with loving kindness and justice." (1:14)

Likewise, verses 19-28 set forth the importance of John for understanding the identity of Jesus with reference to the history of the Jewish religious community to which Jesus belonged. In these verses the religious authorities question John about his identity as they seek to ascertain the identity of the one about whom his message speaks. The questions of the authorities provide markers for understanding both the identities and the roles of John and Jesus. Interestingly, before the questions begin, John declares that he is not the Messiah. There is an honorable tradition among the prophets of their self-knowledge. Amos said: "I am no prophet or a prophet's son." Isaiah said: "Depart from me, for I am a man of unclean lips." Jeremiah said: "I am but a lad." The traditional Greek admonition "Know yourself" surely means "Know who you are and who you are not."

However, John's declaration leads the authorities to ask if he is one of these figures foretold in Scripture—Elijah, Israel's great prophet and miracle worker, or the prophet-like-Moses, who Israel had been awaiting since Moses' death—these, according to their beliefs, would be a signal of, and announcement of the coming of the Messiah. Although John says that he is neither of these figures, his words do signify that he has a prophetic role as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness" (v. 23).

The authorities turn next to challenge John because he is baptizing without the authority to do so. John's response to this challenge establishes his distinction from and relationship to Jesus. John is a forerunner to Jesus, and this establishes his authority to baptize with water. He understands, and he wants the authorities to understand, that his actions are only preparatory in relation to the one whose identity they actually seek but will not acknowledge.

These verses (1:6-8, 19-28) encourage us to reflect on who Jesus is. First, we are reminded that the humanity and divinity of Jesus are not competing aspects of the One we confess to be the Christ. The challenge of understanding Jesus' identity is not about how he is fully human and fully divine; the task is to accept the gift of the incarnation as we confess its fulfillment in Jesus the Christ. According to feminist theologians, the gift of the incarnation is that it helps us to rethink our understanding of embodiment and relationship. As the divine became human in the body of Jesus, we can reclaim healthy connections between the body and the spirit, the goodness of our embodiment. Jesus' incarnation makes possible the human ability to live in relationship with one another in ways that we incarnate God's love for humanity.

Second, in the context of the Advent season, these verses remind us of our identity and our role as witnesses who must testify to Jesus' birth in the midst of the ever-encroaching consumerist claims regarding the meaning of Christmas. Like

John we are to witness to the light of Christ as a voice in the wilderness of twenty-first-century consumerism. As voices in the wilderness, we must make a countercultural claim that dislocates the consumption of things, even when we offer these things as Christmas gifts. Too often we focus on the buying and wearing of brand-name items that have become markers of our identities. The Christian and countercultural claim is that being fully human means the quest for our identity must be grounded upon the relationship we have to Jesus, rather than what we wear. Just as John knew who he was in relation to who Christ was, we must claim our identity, especially remembering that we are not the Christ but witnesses to the Christ. Our role in our time is, like John's role in his time, to confess who we are not and proclaim the One to whom we testify.

Third, like John we live as witnesses to the light of Christ, for the light of Christ is life, v. 4, "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." As we testify to the light, we also embody that light as believers who reveal the life of Christ anew in the world this Advent season. To embody the light and reveal the life of Christ anew means that we are to live so as to nurture our humanity—especially the capacity to love our neighbors and our enemies—and to act humanely, offering compassionate and restorative justice. **Marcia Y. Riggs**

Finally, we cannot read the story about this John without remembering that the world regularly offers resistance to our witness. The danger is not that we will be executed but that we will be ignored. The Word made flesh turns into the word made papier-mâché or plastic, displayed on the lawn with all the charm and all the power of Santa, elves, and red-nosed reindeer.

The true Christian witness is not ashamed to talk about faith. The claim that religion is an entirely private matter, never proclaimed and seldom mentioned, is very far from the convictions of John. But the true Christian witness does not seek to manipulate, coerce, con, or charm another into faith. True Christian witnesses

keep pointing to Jesus, saying, "Here he is." We proclaim not "Believe or perish," but "Come and see" (John 1:46).

Our job is to testify to the Light and be a witness that He not only came to save us but wants a relationship with each of us. Will you be a witness today? Will you testify to the Light in your life? **David L. Bartlett**

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