

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 11, 2005
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6There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. 8He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. . . 19Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

21They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

22Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

23John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "

24Now some Pharisees who had been sent 25questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

28This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

I'm very annoyed. I thought we were done with him, especially after last week. But now, he's back. And I'm reduced to being like the little girl in the movie *Poltergeist*, who, upon recognizing that the ghosts have returned to her home says in that haunting sing-song voice "They're back." And so too is John the Baptist. I tried to avoid him, I really did. It was hard enough to preach on him last week—not only because of my personal hang-ups with poor hygiene but also, and more importantly, because it's hard to know what to make of the guy. Here it is, the weeks before Christmas, and we want the happy stories, we want to sing Christmas carols, we want to say "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" while still living into the consumerism of the season without reservation. John gets in the way of that. I'm concerned that, if I share his prophetic message in too much detail, if I stand up here warning you, as John warned the people of his time, that you and I have gone astray and that we're full of sin and we better say we're sorry and start making up for it soon because the Messiah is on the way and if we don't straighten up we'll be left behind—if I say that, we'll all either leave here feeling angry or guilty. Trying to avoid such a situation, I looked at all of the assigned scripture passages for this third Sunday in Advent, hoping to find something else to preach about, but all of the choices related to our wild and woolly prophet. And so we're forced to wonder, what more does he have to say to us this morning that didn't get said last week?

Obviously there's something yet that we're to take from the life and teachings of John the Baptist. And this morning, we're called to look carefully at the scriptures to discern what that is.

A good starting place in our search for John's message to us is to look at how his role is different in the Gospel according to John than it was in the other three Gospels, including Matthew, the source of last week's scripture. In the Gospel of John, the story of John the Baptist has little to do with our wild and woolly prophet, really. You'll notice that some of the details that we read about John in last week's Gospel according to Matthew are absent here. This Gospel doesn't describe his camel hair clothing, his appetite for locusts and honey, or his ways of wandering the wilderness. The Gospel of John also alleviates John of the titles applied to him in the Gospel according to Matthew—he is not John the Baptist, he is simply described as a man named John. And yet, he's not your average Joe kind of a John. There's something different about this fellow John, a fact that is not lost on the religious leaders. He must have been some kind of threat, or at least a character of great interest, because the religious leaders from Jerusalem sent their posse out into the wilderness where he was baptizing folks to get the low-down on what was going on. When they arrived on the scene, they began grilling John, interrogating him until they had the goods on him. I imagine that these religious lackeys—the middlemen for the temple leaders—weren't too happy about their wilderness assignment and they were anxious to get their questions answered so they could get back home, away from the dust and hot sun of the desert.

They asked John, "Who are you?" He responded, "I am not the Messiah." I suppose he thought that they thought that that he thought he was the Messiah. After all, he was baptizing people, an activity that was seemingly reserved for Messiah types at that time. But, he denied that title so when the presumption that he had messianic tendencies was put aside, they asked, "What then? Are you Elijah?" Apparently, if the baptizer wasn't

the Messiah then the next logical conclusion one would draw about identity was that the great prophet Elijah had returned from the grave. But alas, John responded, "I am not." And so they asked, "Are you the prophet?" And again John responds in the negative with a simple "No." By this time I imagine the middle managers of the religious authority were getting pretty frustrated and with sighs of exasperation said, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" They want a straight answer so that they can just go home. And John responds saying, "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." I imagine they were a bit stymied at this point and revealed their confusion by asking, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John must frustrate them further when he doesn't answer their question. Instead, he tells them "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

And is often the case when faced with a puzzling situation in scripture, we have an advantage that our Biblical ancestors did not, we know that Jesus was the one to come after John. And we know that it was Jesus of whom John was speaking. But the religious middlemen and the crowds gathered in the wilderness would not know until the next day, when Jesus arrives on the scene in Bethany and John declares, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" Only then would any of them begin to understand that John was a witness to Jesus. And that is what is so different about John in this Gospel. He is a witness more than anything else. The title best given to John in the Gospel according to John, is John the Witness rather than John the Baptist.

When we think of witness, our minds may go to images straight out of a Law and Order episode—a cavernous room with tall windows and dark, wood trim. In the front sits a judge in a robe much like this. She presides over the hearing as the plaintiff sits back in a chair in self-righteous comfort, a defendant sits on the edge of a chair, anxious to prove innocence, and a jury of average folks like you and me watch and listen to the presidings, trying to absorb every detail in their earnest attempt to be agents of justice. And then, sitting up front beside the judge is the witness. All eyes are on him as he carefully answers the questions posed to him by the lawyers and judge. Perhaps he’s a character witness, there to attest to the moral character of one party or the other. Maybe he’s an expert witness--a psychologist, medical doctor, coroner, or scientist speaking to the facts of the case. Or the witness may be one of the most unfortunate kinds of witnesses, an eye witness. Someone who, by virtue of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and most likely seeing or hearing something he never would have wanted to see or hear, is now embroiled in this trial, being put on the “hotseat” for nothing he willing did. Regardless of why the person is the witness box, we get the sense that he would rather not be. The witnesses always seem to get grilled and berated as hostile lawyers ask confusing questions in an attempt to get the witness to contradict or even incriminate himself. Being a witness and bearing witness are not easy things.

There are plenty of folks who claim to undertake the challenging task of bearing witness to Jesus these days, but sometimes I wonder just what kind of a witness statement they’re making. This past week there was a buzz in the news about the happenings at the lighting of the national Christmas Tree in Washington, D. C. There were weeks of lead-up to the news story as members of congress, lobbyists, and even the ladies I work out with at Curves, weighed in on whether the tree should be a Christmas Tree or a Holiday Tree. At the tree lighting, a congressman made a particularly strong and public effort to emphasize that it was the lighting of the national *Christmas* Tree implying that the advocates of the Holiday Tree proposal were sorry losers. I suppose he was trying

to make a religious statement and he probably spouts that ol' platitude, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" to his constituents at home and cronies in Washington. And yes, it's a form of bearing witness, but Jesus didn't spout platitudes or snub religious minorities. Jesus didn't waste time competing for sound bites or trying to please a voting district. If members of congress really wanted to witness to Jesus Christ during that tree lighting ceremony, if they used their words to elaborate on why Jesus is the Reason for the Season, maybe they would have pointed out, as the switch was flipped on that gloriously-lit tree, maybe they would have mentioned the hundreds of thousands of Americans who live in poverty and can't afford their electric bill and their electricity is shut off and nary a single Christmas light glitters in their home. That would be bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

And then there are the Statements of Witness that come via email where the witness is unseen but the religious message is clear. At least three times a month, I receive forwarded email messages supporting prayer in school. These email messages include long litanies of how the United States is going to pot because children don't pray in school. I prayed in school nearly every day of middle and high school. But, it wasn't when the principal or some other authoritarian's voice came over the loud speaker telling me to do so. I prayed in school because I also prayed at home and at church and in the mall and in the car. I pray every time I hear a siren, have done so since starting middle school when the fire and police station were just down the hill and we could hear the sirens every time they went off. I don't pray when I hear a siren, and I didn't pray when I heard a high school friend's parent was sick, or I had a big test coming up, or I had a migraine at school, or I was hurt by a classmate's rude remark because someone set aside 60 seconds of enforced prayer time during my school day for me to do so. I prayed because that's what I had been taught to do. The Apostle Paul tells us to pray without ceasing, not pray before homeroom. No piece of legislation mandating school prayer is ever going to be the witness this country needs to orient it back to North on a

moral compass. What this country needs, indeed what every nation that seeks to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God if indeed they claim to have one at all, is to witness with their lives to the power of prayer, not witness with their gloom and doom emails and soapbox speeches about how kids need to pray. Kids will pray if parents pray. Parents will pray if they go to churches, and synagogues, and mosques where they are taught how to pray and they know what it is to be held up in prayer by a community of people who love you. More kids in Suttons Bay will pray when folks like you and me invite them and their families to come to church here. When it comes to prayer in school, or in any place else in town for that matter, that's the most important witness we can give.

What the Gospel of John teaches about this man often known as John the Baptist, the one we just couldn't get away with avoiding today, is that Jesus is looking for a witness. Jesus is looking for folks who don't just talk the talk, arguing over the semantics of the name of a pine tree, but more importantly Jesus is looking for folks who walk the walk. John wasn't just preaching repentance, John was in the River Jordan getting wet over and over again as he baptized with water in preparation for the one who would come to baptize with the Spirit. And we learn about him during Advent perhaps because this is the very time that we're to be preparing to be a witness to Jesus. Christmas gives us something to witness to, it's our opportunity to stand up and, with our words and our lives, get into the witness chair to testify to the hope, peace, love, and joy that are ours through Jesus the Christ.

And so, get ready to come forward to witness. Get ready to tell the story about how knowing Jesus makes a difference in your life. Screw up your courage, because it's not easy to be a witness in this day and age. As I mentioned last week, John the Witness wouldn't have won a popularity contest. But he sure did know how to witness and because he did, other people learned about Jesus and knew about God's love.

But the question remains, what are you going to do to be a witness? You've got 13 more days to decide how you're going to show God's love at Christmas and throughout the New Year. And what a year it's going to be here at Suttons Bay Congregational Church with all of this witnessing going on. No longer will we leave the witnessing to Jesus up to John the Witness. Instead, we'll be joining him on the witness stand as Bruce the Witness and Char the Witness and Peggy the Witness and Diane the Witness and Tom the Witness and Sue the Witness and Bill the Witness and Debbie the Witness and, well, John the Witness. Thanks be to God that John the Baptist and Witness came back to revisit us through the scriptures this morning. For surely there was a lot more for us to learn.