

BEING ON THE WITNESS STAND

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

DECEMBER 17, 2023

Rev. John R. Annable

The third Sunday of Advent invites us to turn our attention back to the story of John the Baptist. This time we have heard the story from the gospel of John. John's Gospel does not describe the appearance of John the baptizer as does Matthew and Mark whose description reminds us of our concept of an Old Testament prophet, although, there had NOT been a prophet around for a while. John the Baptist did appear and sound very much like a prophet including a call to repent in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—but not in John. Old Testament prophets were those folks who showed up to remind the people that they had sinned against God and needed to repent lest they perish.

Now I am not suggesting that in John's gospel John the baptizer did not tell the people they did not need to repent and show signs that one was repenting. But John does not use those words in John's gospel.

John tells us right off the bat that John was this man sent from God whose assignment was to be a witness to give testimony to the light that was Jesus and who was coming into the world.

John's, and our, primary task as disciples of Jesus is to give witness to, to testify to what Christ has done in us. And our witness can come in many different ways. Much of what we give witness to comes from outside of us. Because, you see, to be a Christian is to be someone who has received the gift of faith from the testimony of others and who in turn are called to witness to others. None of us can come up with the Christian faith on our own. There is nothing about the gospel that is just there already in us—innate or self-derived. We must humbly submit to the testimony of witnesses, witnesses like John the Baptist, who give us the faith we did not concoct and did not earn or deserve. Christ is born among us; this is the witness that we ought to render to a world in need of saving hope.

Please understand that John the Baptist was just an ordinary person, like all of us, who appears to give witness to this Christ who was to be the light of the world. And, when it was heard it was heard as GOOD NEWS.

My friends, you, and I, have heard the story of Christmas so many times in our lives that it is no longer good news to us. We hardly stop to think anew about the message and about how the world into which Jesus was born found themselves in great need of a Messiah—the Messiah. Do we still hunger and thirst for a Messiah to come into our world or into our personal situation? Do we pray constantly for his coming?

There are stories told of people who wake up in the morning really struggling to meet the new day with confidence and hope—but even in that state they are able to hear the story of Christ as good news even if it comes from another person who is also struggling. Both, through their witness, is able to find a way to have their faith restored.

One such story is told by the author of our Advent study for this year here at UBC, Rev. Will Willimon. He tells us that it was Amy's first Christmas by herself since her beloved partner of ten years died. In early November, the treatments had ended and Amy had stood by the bedside and said farewell. Now she was alone, grieving, and miserable. On this December night, snow was falling in the city and it seemed especially dark. In Amy's case on that year, it was not the welcomed snow that many people hope for to lift the spirit and add to our conception of Christmas. That Christmas the

snowonly made the night seem colder and left her feeling more alone.

"I had no idea it would hurt this much and for this long," Amy said to herself. I've got to get out of this apartment. These walls are closing in on me, she thought as she sank lower into her grief.

So, she put on her coat, hat, and gloves and walked out. She walked a few blocks when an older woman, dressed in a tattered gray coat, came up to her and said, *"Hey honey. Can't you spare a few bucks for a poor old woman who's got nowhere to go and nobody who cares?"*

Amy looked at her and thought for just a moment, "you, and me both, sister," as she reached in her pocket and found five or six dollars which she handed to her.

The woman looked at the money and seemed to sigh. *"Thanks,"* she said.

Then Amy reached down again and found more money and put it in the woman's hand. The old lady brightened.

"This is about the best news I've gotten in a long time," she said to Amy. She put her arm around her in a half hug, turned, and resumed her post on the corner, perhaps hopeful that tonight, with folks in more of a holiday spirit, she would find another generous soul.

Amy continued her walk down the sidewalk. As she did, the woman's words stuck in her mind: *This is about the best news I've gotten in a long time.* She thought to herself, Bet she doesn't get much good news in her life. Living out here in the cold. Begging for a handout.

Our third Sunday of Advent Gospel begins, *"There was a man sent from God whose name was John."* The scripture is careful to say that John was not the main event. To use the John's Gospel's own terms, John the Baptist wasn't the Light, he was only a witness to the Light. The Light, as John's Gospel will tell us in a few verses, was Jesus. Light of the World.

I think it's interesting that John's Gospel doesn't begin with Christ, God's Son, but it begins with John, just *"a man,"* a human being sent from God. John must have been quite a preacher because the people who heard him thought that he might be Elijah, the great Hebrew prophet, come back from the dead. Some even thought he might be the Messiah, the Christ. John is clear, *I'm just "a voice,"* a fellow human being telling you the good news of the advent of our long-awaited Messiah.

This is the beginning of John's Gospel (the word *"gospel"* means *"good news"*). And in a way, it's also the beginning of the story of Christ. And, when you think about it, it's the beginning of your and my story with Christ.

How did you get here in this church, standing on the threshold of Christmas—the mystery of the incarnation? You are here only because someone *"sent from God"* told you the truth about Christ. Someone became a witness to you that the babe born in Bethlehem was your good news, the best news you'll ever hear.

Again I remind you, nobody is born Christian. This faith is not innate, natural, part of our genetic inheritance. You cannot think up this faith on your own by having a long walk in the woods, or by sitting quietly at the lakeside. Someone must hand it over to you, tell you the story, attempt to help you see that this ancient story of Jesus is your story here, now. Somebody had to be like John the Baptist—a witness, someone who pointed your gaze toward the Way, the Truth, and the Light.

John's witness was to say to a waiting world, *"Look, there, in this Jew from Nazareth named Jesus, there's Mr. Light of the World!"*

Maybe your witness was a beloved grandmother who read Bible stories to you. Perhaps your witness was somebody who sat on the side of a bed in a dormitory room in college and argued with you into the night and overcame your doubts. Or maybe your witness was a writer of a book,

someone whom you have never met, who said just the right words to you whereby you “*saw the light,*” as we sometimes say. Heck, maybe your witness was some wild-eyed preacher like John the Baptist who said something in a sermon that grabbed you by the neck and demanded to be heard!

You wouldn’t be here this Sunday, affirming this faith, expecting the advent of this Messiah if someone had not been your John the Baptist, your witness, your giver of the gift of Good News.

There’s something about this God whereby God chooses to make connection with humanity, to speak to us, through ordinary people like John the Baptist. Ordinary folk who are “*sent from God*”—*and aren’t we all--sent* like John to witness to the Light. If someone had not been a witness to you, you’d still be in the dark, so-to-speak.

In the Acts of the Apostles, after Jesus is crucified and then raised, he meets with his disciples in Jerusalem. They are astounded to see their Lord who had been crucified and buried, back, speaking with them, urging them forward beyond their grief. And the risen Christ DID NOT said to his followers, “*You will shortly be joining me in heaven,*” or “*I want you to go out and teach everybody my philosophy of life,*” or “*I need you now to go forth and work for peace with justice,*” though maybe some of that was implied.

What Jesus called them was “*my witnesses*” (Acts 1:8). I’m sending you out, just like my Father sent out a man named John, into all the world to tell the world the truth about me. To hand over the news: God is coming into the world as one of us in order to save us.

Have you ever had someone call you, or send you a text to tell you while they were shopping and found some special deal on something they found and wanted you to go check it out. You might be thinking it must be too good to be true but it is. You know it is true because they saw it at that great price and they bought it at that great price and so you tell others about it.

Even John the Baptist is reported by Luke’s gospel to be just such an example of good news that seemed too good to be true. In the third chapter of John we find the baptizer talking about lives so changed that it showed the efforts of people to show that they were repenting. He proclaimed the possibilities of lives changed so vividly that people began to wonder if maybe John was the Messiah himself. He told them clearly that he was not. He was baptizing with water and the Messiah, he said, would baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

John was so confident of this understanding of the Messiah that he was willing to baptize Jesus. This was the place in the gospels where Jesus, after his baptism by John, heard the voice from heaven say, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*”

Some time passes after this baptism. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he was rejected in Nazareth, healed Simon’s mother-in-law, calls his disciples, cleanses a leper, heals a paralytic, and does many other things. Meanwhile, John has been arrested and is in prison and his, John’s disciples, report the activity to John. And maybe it was at that moment John thought this is too good to be true because he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, “*Are you really the one who is to come or should we look for another.*”

So, since Jesus had already done all the things I have just mentioned, he told John’s disciples to “*go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf speak, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*”

We are witnesses of what we have seen, what we heard, what we have experienced—those who proclaim the good news that seems too good to be true.

We were talking about Amy. Amy walked on down the street that night. Then she suddenly stopped, wheeled around on the sidewalk, and headed back toward the corner. There she saw the old woman, her hand stretched out to passersby, but none of them stopping.

"Hi. Remember me?" Amy said to her. The woman turned around and brightened—even in the snow, the cold, and the darkness.

"Of course, dear. How could I forget you and your kindness?"

"You said something to me that has stuck in my mind," Amy said.

"I said something? You remember something I said?" asked the woman in amazement.

"You said, 'This is about the best news I've gotten in a long time.'" *That sounds to me like you've been needing some good news.* *Well, I've got some for you. The good news is God knows your name. God loves you. God cares. That's why God came to us as Jesus. Have you heard about Jesus?"*

The old woman nodded cautiously.

"Well," Amy continued, *"Jesus Christ wants to be close to you and for you to know how much he cares. In just three days, we are going to gather in that church down the street and say as much. We'll be singing songs and our bells will ring, and we'll pray and talk and I really want you to go with me. It's our way of letting the world in on the news. I want you to be our guest, to take you there. After service, you and I can grab a bite to eat, get to know one other better and have a proper Christmas Eve celebration."*

The woman began to cry and hid her head in Amy's arms, weeping.

Here was Amy leaving her apartment because her own grief was closing in on her and she found in the retelling of the story of the Light her own light was to some extent rekindled.

Will Willimon in HEAVEN AND EARTH—our Advent Study, said, *"So, here's your Advent/Christmas gospel, good news: There was a person sent from God whose name was Amy (or Tom, or Barry, June, you fill in the name) who "was sent from God." That person was nobody special, an average sort of person who was special in one important way: "sent from God."*

Why are we sent? As a witness to testify concerning *the light*" so that through our witness, *"everyone would believe in the light."* The witness *"wasn't the light,"* not even close. But the witness's *"mission was to testify concerning the light."*

And the Light was the light of all. Through the light shining from the witness, some saw The Light, and the Light continues to shine in the darkness (Jn 1:5), and nothing—not even the darkness—has ever been able to put out the Light.

Now, go share that good news with somebody who needs to hear it.

And don't we all?