

January 5, 2025

**The Witness of John**

**John 1:19-28**

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During Biblical times the coming of a monarch was usually preceded by the appearance of a herald who would announce a king's imminent arrival. Traditionally, the herald called out to the locals that the king was on his way and he and his entourage would remove big stones and other impediments from the roadway so it would be nice and smooth when the king's caravan came by, making its way to the city.

In our passage this morning, we find John the Baptist—not the John that the gospel is named for—announcing that God's chosen one—the Messiah—is on his way. *But John was a different kind of herald, because Jesus was a different kind of King.*

John's way of helping everyone get ready for the King's arrival was not by paving the road. No, John's work out there in the wilderness by the Jordan River was to pave the way to the people's hearts, getting them ready for Jesus the Christ. Because Jesus didn't want a parade. Jesus didn't arrive in style. Jesus came to change people's lives fundamentally, from the inside out.

Which means that John had a very special role in God's plan of salvation. In fact, Jesus himself says that, among human beings, no one had ever been greater than John.

And John preached with such conviction and authority that some who heard him thought he might be the Messiah himself. But John quickly dismissed such misguided rumors.

Our passage today begins with a story of the priests and Levites sent to ask John who, exactly, he was. The Pharisees frequently get a bad rap but wanting to know just who John was and what he was up to is a legitimate question. Who was this

man dressed in camel hair and eating bugs and honey, baptizing people in the Jordan River?

The interrogation is rapid: “Who are you?” He confesses: “I am not the Christ.” The priests and Levites scratch their heads and think harder. How about Elijah? “Are you Elijah, then?” Why ask this question: Let’s go back to the Old Testament book of Second Kings.

Elijah the prophet, instead of dying in the normal way, was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament) talks about God sending Elijah back to earth before the final day of the LORD.

So maybe if John is not the Messiah, he is Elijah – after all he lives in the desert and dresses and eats rather oddly. Once again John’s denial is straightforward. “I am not.”

Their next attempt is “the prophet”. This one is based on Deuteronomy 18. *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.*

Based on this Scripture, some people expected a figure like Moses to appear at some point – but John says “No”. John is not the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet. They have had three guesses at his identity, and they have failed each time.

And so, in desperation they blurt out “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself.” John says, “I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” John is preparing the way for God to come to his people.

John was sent by God with a fundamental job: to announce to the world that this man Jesus, was the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior of the world, Jesus was to be “the Light that shines in the darkness” and which the darkness cannot overcome.

A few years ago, my family and I spent time at Linville Falls Campground off the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina. Taking in the sights in the beautiful Appalachian Mountains, our favorite attraction was Linville Caverns where we

followed a guide deep into an active limestone cave. At the opportune time, the tour stops and then the lanterns are turned off.

Literal pitch blackness. We could not even see our hands in front of our face. The guide explained that our eyes would never adjust to the darkness. We could be down in that cave five minutes, five hours, five years and still never see our hands in front of our faces. Without light, our eyes would never adjust.

We have a fundamental human need for light. "Let there be light," God calls at the beginning of Creation. John testifies that the true light was coming. Without Christ's light, the eyes of our souls will never adjust.

Some years ago, on returning from a business trip, a man brought his wife some souvenirs. Among them was a matchbox that would glow in the dark. After giving it to her, he turned out the light, but the object was not visible. "This must be a joke!" she said. Disappointed, the husband commented, "I've been cheated!"

Then his wife noticed some French words on the box. Taking it to a friend who knew the language, she was told that the directions read: *"If you want me to shine at night, keep me in the sunlight all day."* So she put her gift in a south window. That evening when she turned out the light, the matchbox had a brilliant glow.

The surprised husband asked, "What did you do?" "Oh, I found the secret," she said. "Before it can shine in the dark, it must be exposed to the light."

Not many of us are called by God to be prophets like John. But God does call us to witness about Jesus, the light of the world. We have experienced God in our lives. We know that we could not keep living this life without our faith, without Jesus in our lives, without our Christian community. Just as the matchbox, having been exposed to the sun, took on the nature of the sun and began to shine, so we too as Christians must constantly be exposed to Christ's radiant love so that we may take on his nature and shine as lights in a dark world.

There is no more powerful recommendation, no more powerful witness, than speaking out of our own experiences of healing and restoration to others who need it, too.

Have you experienced healing thanks to Jesus? Has Jesus restored something in you that you thought was lost?

Maybe you have been healed of a bitter and angry heart and have finally found peace in Jesus.

Maybe Jesus has led you to change your ways, leave some things behind that were bad for you, or bad for those around you, and Jesus has shown you a new path forward.

Maybe Jesus has shown you that it isn't things and wealth in this world that brings joy and peace like you have wanted them to. Instead, he has shown you the riches of his love and grace through sharing his love with others.

There is a story about a farmer in China, who had been blinded by cataracts. He went to a Christian Medical compound and was healed of his blindness through a simple surgery. The farmer was overjoyed because he was able to see again, and he left the compound and went into the far interior of China.

A few days later the missionary doctor looked out of his bamboo window and here came the man, holding the front end of a long rope.

In single file behind him, holding onto the rope were several dozen blind people whom the farmer had rounded up and led for miles to come and encounter the doctor who had worked the "miracle" on his eyes.

This farmer was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he couldn't help but share the gift he had been given to *every blind person he could find*. The farmer in China, having seen the light, he brought others to the Giver of light.

He didn't point to himself and his special privilege of being among the "seeing" – but he showed others the way to the one who opened his blind eyes.

20th Century Anglican scholar Evelyn Underhill spoke about this when she described a certain "quality of our inner lives". She wrote, "[There is] the quality which makes contagious Christians, makes people catch the love of God from you."

John was not himself the Light, but the light within John was lit from that same Light to which he witnessed.

We are not God. We are not Christ. But the light that was lit within John has also been lit within us. May we be faithful witnesses to that Light. May that light shining forth brightly from our hearts make us contagious Christians, infectious carriers of the love and good news of Christ.