

Advent 3B
December 14, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Who are you?” This is the question that the priests and Levites put to John the Baptist when they go to visit him.

“Who are you?” they demand. Are you the Messiah? No, John says. Then are you Elijah? No. The prophet? No again. Then just who are you? the Pharisees demand of John.

This question of just who John the Baptist was continues to be a great question. There is a group of religious believers, the Mandaeans, who predominantly live in parts of Iraq and Iran. To the Mandaeans Jesus is not the Messiah, but John continues to be their greatest prophet.

The first-century historian, Flavius Josephus, is one of the greatest historians the world has ever known. He lived at the same time as our Gospel events. The value of his writings for us is that he provides a contemporary glimpse into the world of first century Christianity, yet from a slightly different perspective.

Josephus spent several years early in his life as a member of the Essene sect, who are believed to be the inhabitants of the area where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. John the Baptist is also believed to have been an Essene.

At the age of 19 Josephus became a Pharisee. Even though he was a devout Jew, Josephus believed that the Roman Empire was unstoppable and was against any Jewish effort to revolt against Roman rule. He was, however, eventually swept up in the rebellion and became commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee. He was taken to Rome as a prisoner by the Romans, but was released when his prediction that Vespasian would become emperor came true. From that time on he lived as a Roman citizen, but wrote extensively about the Jews and Judea, presumably to explain his homeland and people to the Romans.

Josephus had this to say about John the Baptist:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him.¹

Josephus speaks in this passage about the destruction of Herod's army, which occurred in the year 36. According to Josephus, this destruction was interpreted as punishment for Herod's killing John. In this passage Josephus speaks as an independent witness to the ministry of John. We hear much of what we already know about John: that he urged people to repent, that the devout should love God and their neighbor, and that he performed a baptism of cleansing.

But today's Gospel text also tells us that John's baptism – and, indeed, his entire ministry, was simply a precursor. He was a forerunner, a witness to the one who was to come after him. The word used is *martyreo* – from which our English word martyr is derived. This word is only used twice in the other three Gospels, but it's used *thirty-three* times in the fourth Gospel. This role of John as witness is at the heart of our fourth Gospel-writer's understanding of who John is. The Gospel writer states at the outset that John “came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”²

Our Gospel writer very intentionally uses the imagery of the law courts in his writing, using words like “witness” and “testify.” In any trial, there's a defendant, and there are the witnesses who present testimony as to their version of events. Presumably all the witnesses have seen the same event, but each present their testimony from their particular perspective. But as important as the witnesses in the case are, they bear little significance other than the one to whom they bear testimony. The witnesses are not the main players on the stage. The case before us today is not only, “Who is John the Baptist?” but more importantly, “Who is Jesus?”

We've already heard the witness of John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading. And we've heard the witness of Josephus, testifying about the goodness of John and his ministry. Josephus also has testimony to present about Jesus. He says:

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named for him, are not extinct at this day.³

And so Josephus would seem to agree with John – that Jesus is Christ. He states it unambiguously. Jesus is, indeed, the “light” come into the world.

In the case before us today, the Light coming into the darkness demands a verdict. Testimony has that quality about itself: it demands a verdict. In today's scripture reading, God is going public. The Word becoming flesh is no private matter.

A witness named John points to that event. And the witness forces a verdict from the public. The court is not much interested in the personality or the character of the witness. What the court cares about is truth. And based on the testimony of John the Baptist and Josephus, the verdict is this: that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.

So we've asked and answered the question, "Who is John the Baptist?" John is the one who points toward Jesus. And we've asked and answered the question, "Who is Jesus?" Jesus is the Light who came into darkness, the Word made flesh, God made human in order to deliver humanity from its bondage to sin and death.

So the only question that remains to be answered is, "Who are *you*?" Are you one who, during this Christmas season, has claimed the gift that God offers freely to all people? Are you one who can stand up and unambiguously proclaim that Jesus is the Christ?

Because "the Christ child who is born among us is not only a gift; he is an assignment. He is the Light of Lights, but he needs a witness, somebody whose whole life says to the world, "Look, do you see what I've seen?"

"At this time of year, somebody sometimes asks the sentimental question, 'If you can keep Christmas for one day a year, why not keep it in your heart every day of the year?'

“But we are witnesses. We’re not supposed to ‘keep Christmas’ in our hearts. We’re supposed to give it away, to tell what’s happened, how the world has changed now that God is with us.”⁴

Every week in worship we stand to declare the Creed. This is our Christian witness to the Light. Today, as we stand together and say these words, think of this as *your* testimony to the truth.

Our call is to proclaim the truth of the Gift that God has given us. It’s a Gift that’s supposed to go on giving. I ask you to rededicate your lives to proclaiming this testimony, to bear witness with words and deeds, to the truth which you hold dear in your hearts.

Christmas isn’t just one day a year. Jesus isn’t the Gift that’s given only once. Jesus comes to us new every day. Jesus is a gift that’s meant to be shared.

Amen.

<1,531 words>

¹ *Jewish Antiquities*, translated by William Whiston, XVIII, 5, iii (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 581.

² John 1:7-8

³ *Jewish Antiquities*, translated by William Whiston, XVIII, 3, iii (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 576.

⁴ “Witness” by William Willimon, in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 47.