

The Church: Witness to God's Light

Text:

John 1:1-36

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 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." (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

John 3:22-36

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison).

Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness--look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease."

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Introduction:

Last time we spoke of the Church as Christ's possession. We saw that we have been called by Christ, taught by Christ, redeemed by Christ, commissioned by Christ, and empowered by Christ. Today we are going to expand on the fourth of those five things, the mission that Christ has given the church. Our mission is to bear witness to Christ. In Acts 1:8, just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus told his disciples: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

If we are to truly be the church, and to fulfill our mission in the world, we must understand our mission, and that mission is to bear witness to God's light, Jesus Christ. To help us understand what we are to be doing and how to do it, I have taken the example of someone who chronologically precedes the church, but who exemplifies beautifully what it means to bear witness to Christ. The passages we have read from the Gospel of John all speak of John the Baptist's witness to Jesus. This is the thing that is emphasized about John the Baptist in the Gospel of John. The words "witness" and "testimony" are used in relationship to John 10 times in this Gospel.

In the passage we read from the first chapter John first tells us at the beginning of the passage that God's whole purpose in sending John was that he might bear witness. The rest of the chapter then recounts four specific occasions on which John bore witness:

- An unnamed occasion where John announces that it is Jesus who has brought God's full revelation of grace, and the knowledge of God concluding with the profound statement of verse 18: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." (verses 15-18).
- In Bethany beyond Jordan when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question him. (verses 19-23).
- The next day when John sees Jesus coming and cries out "behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." He then bears witness to what he had observed when he had baptized Jesus.
- The following day when John again sees Jesus and repeats what he had said the day before about Jesus being the Lamb of God. On this occasion two of John's disciples leave off following him to follow Jesus and he does not forbid them.

In the passage we have read from chapter three some of John's disciples question him as to why Jesus is gaining more followers than he. John's reply is summed up in his well known statement in verse 30: "He must increase but I must decrease."

As we meditate upon the life and ministry of John we can learn some things about our own calling.

I. We are not the Light

The first thing that John says about John the Baptist was that he was sent from God as a testimony to bear witness to the light. He then emphasizes in 1:6 that "he was not the light, but was sent to bear testimony to the light." That John was fully convinced of this is proved by what we have seen in the following passages. John has no agenda but to bear witness to Christ, and when Christ appears and his ministry begins to diminish, he does not see it as failure, but as success; for this was the thing God sent him to do.

What we might need to be reminded of is how popular John was among the people and how easy it would have been for him to continue his own movement independent of Jesus. The people had accepted him as a prophet of God, the first to appear in Israel in 400 years. Everyone wanted to hear him and many were responding to his call to repentance and baptism. This is evidenced not only in the Gospels, but in the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who wrote:

"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 anything 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." (*Antiquities*, XVII, 5, ii).

Given his popularity with the people it would have been easy for John to have started his own movement, but he knew why he was there. He knew that he “was not the light”, but only a witness to the light. Only the light can help. We must never mistake ourselves for the light. We are witnesses to the light but we are never the light.

II. We are Called to Bear Witness to the Light

Christ is the Light. He is God's truth incarnate. He is the “Word” become “flesh”. He has the power to save and transform the world, and each individual in the world. Only he has that power; only he is light. We can be witnesses to the light, but we can never be light. Our calling like that of John the Baptist is to be a witness to the Light. The great question for us then becomes: “How do we bear witness to the light?” That question should preoccupy us; it should motivate all that we do. Let me suggest two things that we must do if we are to be witnesses to the light. First we must walk in the light of Christ, and secondly we must clearly articulate the truth of Christ.

A. By Walking in the Light

In a well-known passage in Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus says something that, at first, may seem to contradict what we have been saying. He says: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Now we have just said that we are not the light; that Christ is the light and we only bear witness to the light. Is Jesus Contradicting that when he says to his disciples, “you are the light of the world”? No, I don't think so. We are light only because we reflect the light of Christ. But notice further what he says in the passage. He says that we cause the light to shine by our good works that cause men to glorify God. Now these are not just any good works, but they are specifically the good that are the product of

our relationship with Christ, works that cause others to glorify God, not to admire us. In John's Gospel Jesus defines these works as the fruit that is produced as a result of us the branches, remaining attached to him, the vine.

Witness begins with works. When others see the life of Christ in us; we reflect the light of Christ which brings life to the world.

B. By Clearly Articulating the Truth about the Light

If witness begins with works, it ends with words. This is clearly demonstrated in the life of John the Baptist. In the passages we read he is always speaking, and he is always, with his words, directing the attention away from himself and towards Christ. He tells us profound things about Christ, who he is and what his work is. He especially points us to Christ as "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

This is our calling. We are not the light, but we know the light. We must walk in the light, and allow Christ, who is the light, to produce in us works of light; then we must always be ready to articulate the message of Christ with words that draw people to Christ, "the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."