

And the Word Became Flesh

John 1:1-18

The Reverend Doctor Michael Newheart

January 2, 2022

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*¹

Today is the second Sunday after Christmas. It's also Epiphany Sunday. "Epiphany" means "revelation" or "manifestation." Epiphany is the day associated with the visit of the Magi, or the Wise Men, although it is sometimes associated with the revelation of Jesus more generally. It is in this latter sense that the lectionary has chosen for Epiphany Sunday John 1:1-18, which speaks of Jesus making God known, or revealing God. Certainly an important figure in revealing Jesus is John the Baptist, who is named twice in this passage. Jesus is only mentioned once. And each time John is mentioned, he is said to be a witness.

In this sermon, I have three points: 1. John as witness, 2. Our witnesses today, 3. Us as witnesses.

1.

When I think of John the Baptist, I think of the painting by the sixteenth-century German painter Matthias Grunewald. It is an altarpiece in Isenheim, France. Perhaps some of you have seen it. Here John points a bony finger to the crucified Christ. And he quotes his last recorded words in the Gospel of John: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This scene is not recorded anywhere in the New Testament, mainly because John was arrested and executed before Jesus was, but it serves symbolically that John was a witness to Jesus.

The name "John" appears plenty of times in the New Testament: There's John the Baptist, who is our focus for today; John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples; there is the author of the book of Revelation, which is sometimes called the Revelation to John. Then we have a Gospel of John and three Epistles of John. I will not bore you with the relationship between these people and books named John. There is a good deal of controversy among biblical scholars about them. Our focus today is on John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer, who incidentally appears in all four Gospels. He also is most certainly NOT the son of Zebedee or the author of the Gospel or Epistles of John. In the first three Gospels, which are called the Synoptic Gospels, John baptizes. He baptizes Jesus, among many others. In the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, John the Baptist's primary activity is that of WITNESS. Our passage today doesn't say anything at all about John baptizing, but it says plenty about John witnessing or testifying. In these verses, the first 18 verses of the Gospel, John is mentioned in four verses, and four times it is said that he is a witness, that is, one who gives testimony. The Gospel says all these wonderful things about the Word: The Word was in the beginning with God, bringing things into being, bringing life and light. Wow! WOW! And then John comes in: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (1:6). Even before Jesus' name is mentioned, John appears. "He came as a witness to testify to the light" (1:7a). In other words, he came as a

¹ This prayer is adapted from Psalm 19:14.

witness to bear witness to the light, a testifier to testify to the light. A little redundant? Yes, but the Gospel has a point. And just in case you missed it: "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" (1:7b). John the Baptist is not the light. Jesus is the light. Twice in the Gospel, Jesus says that he is the light of the world (8:12; 9:5). John is not the light. No way! Uh-huh! JESUS is the light; he is the Word Incarnate. John was a witness to that light.

Some of you were here at the later service on Christmas Eve. You heard me read dramatically this passage. It says, "John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me' " (1:15). John testified, and he testified by crying out, by yelling. He was an Old Yeller, though I'm not so sure that he was old. Maybe he was a new yeller, but whether old or new, he yelled and testified that Jesus was superior.

Outside of our passage, John continues to be a witness to the light. When questioned, John says that he's not the Messiah or the prophet. He says that he is a voice crying in the wilderness (1:19-23). John points to Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (1:29). (That's the reason that John is sometimes pictured with a lamb.) He also says that he saw the Spirit descend on him like a dove (1:32). John further testifies that Jesus is the Son of God, and when John tells two of his disciples that Jesus is the Lamb of God, they leave John and go follow Jesus (1:35-37). John as the Baptist is a witness to the light.

John always points us to Jesus. He always testifies. He always bears witness. That is the spirit of John that is still among us: Where we see ugliness, he sees beauty. Where we see hatred, he sees love. Where we see hell, he sees heaven. Where we see death, he sees life.

2.

Who are the witnesses to the Light in our own day? Who are the John the Baptist figures, who testify, bear witnesses to the Light? I think of two people of African descent who have recently passed. One is Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, who testified to the light of all people and who helped bring down apartheid. I remember hearing him preach at Howard University. He said that not all of us can be a VIP, a very important person, but we all are VSP, a very special person. Tutu said that we are to get up every morning, look into the mirror, and tell ourselves, "I am a VSP, a very special person, because I am God's representative." What an ebullient spirit Tutu had. He certainly was a VSP, a very special person, a witness to the light.

Another witness to the Light that has recently passed is bell hooks, whose voluminous writings have inspired many, including myself. She always spelled her name in lower case letters because she wanted the emphasis to be on her ideas and not herself. One of those ideas is that feminism is for everyone, no matter gender, class, or race. hooks also believed in love. She said, "I believe wholeheartedly that the only way out of domination is love, and the only way into really being able to connect with others, and to know how to be, is to be participating in every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love."² Both Tutu and hooks were witnesses to the Light.

² "bell hooks, Pathbreaking Black Feminist, Dies at 69."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/books/bell-hooks-dead.html>

John the Baptist figures, though, are still among us. In a recent article in *Sojourners* entitled, "WHO WILL LIGHT OUR WAY INTO THE NEW YEAR?" Kaitlyn Curtice, the author of *Native*, which many of us read, talks about those lesser-known figures who are testifying to the light. She writes, "I think of a new book called *Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints*, written by Daneen Akers, which spotlights saints and prophets from across the world and throughout time, from Rumi to Saint Francis to Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg to Sikh speaker and activist Valerie Kaur. I think of Megan Rapinoe, who was nominated as *Sports Illustrated's* Sportsperson of the Year for her work in the sports world fighting for equity and justice. I think of the man I heard about on the radio this morning who is paying for all the Christmas presents for a family whose house was recently broken into." Curtice concludes, "To get through [the new year], we have to pay attention to where we are going and who is going to help us get there. The lamplighter reminds us that even when things feel dark, there is always a light to show us the way."³ Perhaps Curtice herself is a witness for us to testify to the light.

3.

Not only was John a witness, not only do we see others in our world today as witnesses, but we ourselves are witnesses to the Light. As First Church, West Hartford, we testify not to ourselves as to how caring and cool and with-it and historic we are, but rather we testify to Jesus, to truth, to justice, to compassion. We are witnesses. Next week, a candidate for senior pastor will preach. Not only will the church be considering the candidate, but the candidate will be considering the church. To what does this church testify? To what does it bear witness? Its motto says that we testify to Spirit-living, service-commitment, and all-openness. How is our testimony, our witness manifested in what we do at First Church?

Furthermore, we are witnesses to one another. Recently Pastor Amie told me about a conversation she had with a parishioner in which she bore witness to that person's pain. I liked that idea: Ministry as often bearing witness to one's pain. Ministry also means bearing witness to one's joy, to the movement of God in one's life. As Paul said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

Ultimately, then, we look not only to John, not only to others, we look in the mirror for our witnesses. Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who will be witness for all? Here am I. Send me. We are already sent. Already in the world, bearing witness to Jesus, to peace, to justice, to love. Witnessing is not a choice. It's what we are. We are witnesses. Like John, we are witnesses.

And all God's people said, Amen.

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³ Kaitlin Curtice, "WHO WILL LIGHT OUR WAY INTO THE NEW YEAR?"
https://sojo.net/articles/who-will-light-our-way-new-year?fbclid=IwAR1AqckVnEOQqvK0eoZxmpxGtq54BYRCrt5TpJ7M1UaOmhbogu_Lf0Qu0Q