

Sermon December 17 from John 1:6-8; 19-28

“The Right Kind of Crazy”

There was a poor little boy who once heard his Sunday School teacher say, “Jesus is the light of the world.” After hearing his teacher say this, he took her remark quite literally. Following class, the boy said to his teacher. “If Jesus really is the light of the world, I wish Jesus would come hang out in my alley. It’s awfully dark where I live.”

The theme for this third Sunday in Advent is the arrival of God. This week is a time of joy and celebration and is called “Gaudete” Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word meaning “rejoice.” From the book of Philippians 4:4,5, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near.” Today marks lighting the pink candle instead of a purple candle. Today represents a shift in attitude from hope, repentance, and fear of the coming Judge to rejoicing at the coming of salvation and the kingdom of God as Jesus makes all things new. Today, we continue on the journey, reflecting on the person and message of John the Baptist from the Gospel of John. Before we continue, let us pause for a moment of prayer.

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming into the world to pay the price for our sins. We do not always appreciate how high a cost you paid and how your birth made good on the promises God the Father made. Thank you for your great love, sacrifice, and victory against evil. Thank you. While we know hard times may come, your kingdom has come through the birth of a baby in a manger stall. Help us never grow tired of the Christmas story, discover it anew, and see how great it is that we can know it. Show us how to have joy every day, how to rejoice in your love time and time again. We ask these things in your name. Amen.

The message of John’s Gospel came from the pen of one of the three disciples Jesus chose to stay close to Him throughout His earthly ministry. John was part of the inner circle of Jesus while on earth, and at Jesus’ crucifixion, he was the only one to stay by Jesus’ side at the cross. All four Gospels record something about John the Baptist, yet, through the centuries, the Gospel of John has blessed the hearts of God’s people, often being referred to as “God’s love letter to the world. Some of the most widely known and best texts in the Word of God come from John’s Gospel. In John 3:16, he writes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Then, in John 6:35: “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John’s Gospel is unique. John gives no account of Christ’s birth and no mention of his baptism. The Lord’s Supper is not included, nor is there any mention of Jesus’ ascension, yet at the same time, John provides detailed knowledge of things that the other Gospels omit. For instance, John alone speaks of Jesus changing water into wine at Cana, the woman of Samaria and his offer of a drink at the well, the visit of Nicodemus, who was a ruler of the Jews, to ask Jesus about his miracles, and the raising of Lazarus. However, the point of John’s writing is this: if you are seeking a turning point in your faith about who Jesus Christ is, then John’s Gospel will strengthen and encourage you in the service of him, as John writes, “These (meaning words) are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you

may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Who wrote these things? A man sent from God also named John.

Our witness to Jesus is a necessity. What I mean is that John the Baptist, too, was a human sent by God the Creator to bear witness to the light. John is certainly not someone we think about bringing good tidings at Christmas, and those who heard John the Baptist thought he was crazy. However crazy, John was the right kind of wild-eyed crazy, eating bugs and wearing camel hair to lead us from the manger to the cross. His hearers heard him speak in bold riddles to get people’s attention. He was causing a revolution, just like all the great evangelists. Yet, John didn’t want to see his name in lights or to grasp onto the unsatisfying fruit of fame, only to say he was not the light but came to bear witness about the light, a light that the world had not yet recognized. In him was life, and that light was the light of men, and so it looks as if the way this Word, Life, and Light will spread through the world simply with the ease of power and brightness. But John knows that is not the case, for it will only spread through the witness of human beings and no other way.

In verse 6, we read, “There was a man.” There was a person. There will always be a person. A person like you. A person like me. Humans who bear witness to Christ with words will be the means of everyone who comes to faith. That is the plan that the gospel will come through human witness. Our witness is a great necessity, and that is the first point of today’s message.

Continuing in verse 6, “There was a man sent from God.” The necessity of our witness to Christ does not mean God depends on the initiative of human will. You see, God sent his Son and is sending us as witnesses to Jesus. In Matthew 9:38, Jesus said, “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” God sees to it that we pray, and he sees to it that he answers and sends. “As the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you.”

We serve a saving and sending God, the one who provides the foundation of our salvation in Jesus Christ, and our mission is to bear witness to a light nobody has yet recognized that all might ***believe*** through him. The Gospel writing introduces John so suddenly and so jarringly as a mere human witness sent by God on a mission to witness to the light. John never used the word faith, for faith requires belief, and John used the phrase “to believe” 98 times in 85 verses of his Gospel, which is more than all the uses in the Synoptic Gospels combined, stressing an active, continuous, and vital trust in Jesus.

Over and over, the testimony of John the Baptist repeats itself, saying he was not the light but came to bear witness about the light. I am not the Christ, and this is the great ***not*** of his witness. John, the Gospel writer, is so bent on making sure that we feel the “***not***” of John the Baptist’s testimony. Then, as the Jews, priests, and Levites from Jerusalem asked him, “What then, are you Elijah?” He said I am “***not***”. Are you the prophet? NO. In verses 26-27, John answers them again, saying, “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 unite.”

This is the great *not* of our witness to Christ. I am not the light, and I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. I am not worthy to untie his sandals—the beautiful statement in our witness for Christ. Listen to what John says in chapter 3, verses 28-30. “You yourselves

bear me witness that I said, “I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.” Friends, the great ***not*** of our witness is when all attention turns to Christ and away from us. He must increase, and we must decrease. We must make much of Him; we must not make much of ourselves.

What, then, is John? Well, he is John, the witness. The necessary witness who is not the Christ. Well, John, what do you say about yourself? Who are you? “I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness; make straight the way of the Lord.” I am simply a voice bearing witness to the Son of God. So, what is the lesson for us? We must be Christ’s witnesses. It is a great necessity. Faith comes by hearing a witness. We must not make much of ourselves.

Christmas is often not a very bright time of the year for many people. Aside from the political unrest in the world, countless winds and storms threaten to blow out the low flickering candle of our spiritual life. Relationships between families and friends hang by a loose thread, and emotions run high, often accelerated by the pressure to cook or buy the right gifts, and so on. The recurrent confusion that seems to always surface around Christmas serves as a powerful reminder of the Jewish experience during the time of the prophet Isaiah.

“Behold, the people walking in darkness,” says Isaiah. Indeed, at the time of Jesus’ birth, the people were again walking in darkness. In every generation, we have witnessed people walking in darkness. Someone once said there is no night so dark that a little candle cannot break its darkness. That is what John says in verse 5 of his gospel, “The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” No matter how hard the darkness tries, it can never extinguish the light of even the tiniest candle.

In closing, we must be witnesses to Jesus. It is a great necessity, and our faith comes from hearing a witness. We must not bend to the praise of self-achievements, for from the very beginning of John’s Gospel, there is a human witness to the light where He must increase, and we must decrease. Jesus knew something about going unrecognized. He knew something about not being seen. And so maybe that is why he was so good at raising those others among us whom we do not know: the homeless, the street people, or the working poor. These people are among us, and most of the time, we do not know who they really are. They are children of the heavenly Father. If, perhaps today, you do not know him, if, by the gift of faith, you can recognize him lying in the manger, be thankful. It is our task to imitate John the Baptist, to do our best to point him out to a world that so needs all the grace and truth Jesus alone brings. Crazy John should remind us that Advent and Christmas are not just about comfort but transformation, and I pray that you will receive immense comfort surrounded by love, and when you meet Jesus, everything will change. Are you the right kind of crazy to be a witness? I hope so. Amen.

Sermon Christmas Eve

Many Christians complain a lot about Christmas. Too commercial, they say. It has pagan origins. We have to go to put Christ back into Christmas. The only thing they haven't said is Bah humbug. Yes, Christmas has become very commercial. For many years, I, too, have avoided radio stations and stores around the season, but as we purchase and wrap gifts, every present can be a silent testimony to the supreme gift, God's only begotten Son. Christians seem divided in their views of Christmas. Some want to give up on it and hand it over to the stores. Others want to salvage it and use it to say something important about the birth of Jesus to a weary secular world. I, for one, would like to take my place with John as a witness concerning that light so that through him, all people might believe. Prepare the way, people; the true light is soon to come into the world.

Yes, there is always some controversy surrounding Santa and his reindeer. Some say it's pure fiction. But instead of complaining about the nonessentials, which only focuses on them, we need to call attention to the truth of the Baby who was born in Bethlehem.

What about the cry to put Christ back into Christmas? Well, quite frankly, He never left. Listen to the words of the carols heard over and over in stores and on the streets. They proclaim more truth in one holiday than many pulpits do in three months. They put into the minds of young and old the wonderful truth that "the Lord is come" and that He is to be welcomed and adored.

When I was young, growing up in a family of six, I always held Christmas in high esteem as I looked forward each year to the Christmas Eve service—those evenings always seemed to enliven my spiritual soul.