## John 1:6-8; 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He 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.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for 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, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

There is a distinct difference between the way the gospel writers Mark and John write about the man John, Jesus' cousin and friend. Mark paints a vivid picture of a strange figure standing in the wilderness and crying out about baptism, urging people to repent of their sins and receive God's forgiveness. Mark tells us that John wears clothes made of camel's hair and has a leather belt cinched around his waist, that his diet consists of locusts and wild honey. Artists have interpreted this figure as a disheveled and solitary man, the kind we might cross the street to avoid. It is easy to focus more on the strangeness of John in Mark's account than on the message he comes to proclaim.

The gospel writer John tells the story differently. He simply describes John as a man sent from God. There is no mention of the way John dresses or what he eats. The “otherness” or strangeness of John in this account comes from his message and the inability of the priests and Levites to pin down John's identity in a way that satisfies them. When questioned by the authorities, John deflects attention away from himself. He tells the church officials that he is not the Messiah, not Elijah nor a prophet. He is simply a man who comes to testify to the light, a voice echoing Isaiah's call to make straight the way of the Lord. In short, in John's gospel, John is not the focus. The story is not about John; John's whole purpose in life is to point to Jesus.

It's all about Jesus. In almost three decades of being a pastor, that's been a hard lesson for me to learn. I'm still learning it and still making mistakes along the way, every day. From the first inkling that God might be calling someone to ordained ministry, the scrutiny begins. When I first started the process, I took all the aptitude tests and talked with the synod psychologist to determine my suitability to be a pastor. I met with the candidacy committee and faculty advisors. All through seminary, I attended classes, took tests and wrote papers, then waited for others to tell me if I passed, if I was qualified to go on to the next step. It was hard for me sometimes, a business major in college who had to sit in the front of my theology classes and raise my hand every time I encountered a word or term I hadn't heard before, annoying all my religion-major classmates with my questions. To be honest, I still sometimes have to look those words up and sometimes wonder if I'm really as well-suited for this life as some of my colleagues are. I've fallen into the trap of believing that the ministry to which I've been called is somehow mine, that my personality and ability shapes it, that the successes or failures of each of these calls depends on me, on what I do or don't do. I forget sometimes why I'm here and that's why scripture passages like this one from John are crucial. I'm simply a woman sent by God, whose name is Linda, who comes as a witness to testify to the light. I myself am not the light – I can't be the light - but I come to testify to the light, the one true light which is coming into the world. This is an incredibly important lesson for all of us to learn.

It's about Jesus. That's what John reminds us. “In the beginning was the Word”; “in him was life”; “the light shines”; “darkness did not – does not - overcome it.” For each one of us, called to be a follower of Jesus, it's all about the light. The light is shining. It is a light that defies our human ability to capture or to define. The light has a voice that speaks life to us. The light has hands that hold and heal us. The light has a name – Jesus, the son of Mary, the Son of God. You and I are here to point to this light. Our words and actions are not of our own making, but spring from the mystery and power of Jesus. You and I are called to believe that the light of the world shines into all the dark places of our lives and our souls; we are invited to feel the warmth of Christ's light thaw the icy chill in our hearts. We face the harsh truth that left to our own devices and choices, we generate more darkness than we do light. In the cold and dark of our days and nights, we yearn for the light that shines hope upon us and God gives us faith to believe in the light that always has been and always will be.

Each week, as we light another candle on the Advent wreath, God is reminding us of God's light increasing in this world. You and I have no control over this light; nothing we do or fail to do can change what God has chosen to do. We are here as witnesses; our calling is to point to the light that is our salvation. No matter how unsuited we might feel we are for that calling, God has chosen to include each one of us in God's plan. We don't have to change a thing about who we are and what we are. Our testimony comes from our mouths but it also through our hands. The liberating thing about being witnesses to the light of Christ is that our actions are not desperate attempts to win God's favor or approval, but rather announcements of the grace of God coming to save us from ourselves. When we witness to the light of Christ, we speak the truth about God's healing power, about God's radical justice, about God bringing peace into every place we have created conflict, about God's vision in which enemies are transformed by the power of love and no one is lord over another.

In this season of anticipation, of waiting and watching, as we acknowledge the unsettling nature of the darkness around us, we yearn for the inbreaking of light. In faith, we witness to the one whose life is the light of the world and who, even now, is conquering the power of the darkness that cannot overcome him. It really is all about Jesus.

Amen.

*Advent 3B*

*December 17, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 1: 6-8; 19-28*

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