

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Advent 3, Series B  
Saturday, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
Sunday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Sermon: Confessing Christ**  
**Texts: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

Focus Statement: John the Baptist confessed that he was not the Christ.

Function Statement: That they would joyfully point people to Jesus, not ourselves.

Sermon Structure: Story-Interrupted

Doctrinal Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... is my Lord..."

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel lesson today we read how the Jewish religious leaders sent an investigative committee of priests and Levites to figure out what John the Baptist was up to. By birth, John was a priest. After all, he was the orphaned son of a priest named Zechariah who'd died many years earlier. But rather than going into the family business and offering animal sacrifices, John baptized people in the wilderness. He traded in his robes and turban for a tunic made out of camel's hair. Instead of burning incense in the Temple, he burned people's pride. John didn't look like a priest while preaching with locust legs stuck between his teeth, but John *was* a priest.

So the Pharisees must have said to the priests in Jerusalem, "You guys better go out to Bethany and see what that weird priest is doing." So they went.

"Who are you?" they asked when they found John.

Sensing the question on everyone's mind, John boldly declared, "I am not the Christ." That is, I'm not the Messiah. I'm not the promised Savior that everyone is waiting for.

"What then?" they persisted. "Are you Elijah?" Again, not a strange thing to ask. Remember that Elijah never died; he was caught up to heaven in a chariot of fire while he was still alive (2 Kings 2:11). Then, nearly 400 years before John the Baptist showed up, in the *very*

*last* prophecy that Yahweh made in the Old Testament, he promised, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction” (Mal. 4:5).

Then for four *hundred* years God did not speak a single word to his people. Then after those 400 years of prophetic silence were over, John the Baptist showed up out of nowhere preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and telling people to “repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:4, 15). No wonder that people thought maybe John was the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy. He even dressed the part because Elijah—not John—was the first prophet to put on animal skins and a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). John sounded like Elijah and looked like Elijah. Maybe he *was* Elijah! After all, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck!

But John demurred on that one too. “I’m not Elijah,” he said (cf. John 1:21). (Notably, this is one point that John got wrong. For, in fact, Jesus later explicitly told his disciples that John was the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy. “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,” Jesus said. “And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” [Matt. 11:13-14; cp. Mark 9:11-13]).

So the Jewish religious leaders continued, asking John, “Are you the Prophet?”

Here was another interesting idea. Way back in the time of the Exodus, Moses foretold that someday God would raise up a prophet like him from among the people of Israel—the so-called Prophet-Like-Moses (cf. Deut. 18:18). Maybe John was that guy.

But in reply, he said simply, “No.”

“Then *who are you?*” they asked in exasperation. “We need to give a report to the home office. Who do you claim to be?” (cf. 1:22).

To which John stated simply, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said” (John 1:23). (In fact, that was last week’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 40!)

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, to get people ready for the coming of the true Messiah. After all, in the ancient world people would go to great lengths in order to roll out the red carpet for a coming king or visiting dignitary. They would clean up the city, clear the rabble and rubble from the road, shine the silver and put out the best china.

John came to get people ready for the first coming of Jesus when he began his ministry nearly 2,000 years ago. In a similar way, the Church today helps people get ready for the *Second* Coming of Jesus on the Last Day, which is what the season of Advent is all about. Remember: Advent comes from the Latin word for “appearing” or “coming” (*adventus*).

But none of this was enough for the priests who questioned John. If he wasn’t the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, then why was he baptizing people? Baptism, I should point out, was not an entirely unheard-of thing among first-century Jews. In fact, any Gentile (that is, non-Jew) who converted to Judaism had to disrobe and undergo a ritual washing in a bath known as a *mikvah* (male converts, of course, also had to undergo circumcision). To this day, Jewish synagogues maintain a *mikvah* in the hope that a few Gentile neighbors might become Jews.

What was strange about John the Baptist was not the fact that he was baptizing people. It was the fact that he was baptizing *Jews*. Baptism was for Gentile proselytes (converts), but not for the children of Abraham. Yet John the Baptist did just that. For, as we heard last week, “*all* the country of Judea and *all* Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in

the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:5). Yet not only did John suggest that even Jews needed to be baptized, he even went so far as to claim that they couldn’t hang their hat on their family tree in order to be saved. “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (Matt. 3:9).

John’s message was simple. He himself was *not* the Messiah, but he did come to prepare the way *for* the Messiah, to get things in order by turning the hearts of the fathers back to the children and the hearts of the children back to their fathers. “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him” (John 1:7).

John the Baptist was not afraid to confess the truth about Jesus Christ. “He confessed and did not deny...” (John 1:20). So the next day, when he saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). John knew that his job was to point people to Jesus, to the Savior who would set the world to rights and make all things new by forgiving sins and giving eternal life to all who see his light (cf. 1:8).

John’s message and ministry attracted a lot of attention, but John was not the main show. As the cartoon in last week’s bulletin remarked, John always knew that he was the opening act. And sometime later, when John’s jealous disciples complained that Jesus was becoming more popular than his cousin, John humbly replied, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). For John knew that his life and ministry were never about John. They were *always* about Jesus.

The same is true for you and me. We are often tempted to believe that we are the directors of our own destiny and the architects of our plans. But our real reason to exist is to point people to Jesus. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “Man’s chief end is to

glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” We glorify God when we give him the glory for all the good things in our life—above all, our salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And we glorify God when we help our friends, family, and neighbors to know Jesus as Savior and Lord. For, whether they realize it or not, *Jesus* is the One they have been waiting for their entire lives. He already came on the first Christmas long day. He will come again on the Last Day. But *today* he wants to come into their heart.

So we are called to confess Christ in our place and time, among the people we know (and sometimes even to people we don’t know). As Martin Luther writes:

“We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But He permits us to live here that we may bring others to faith, just as He brought us” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 30, pg. 11).

Like John the Baptist, we are here to point people to Jesus. We ourselves are not the light, but we bear witness *about* the Light: Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Our world is a very dark place, and not just because the nights are getting longer the closer we get to the winter solstice. The world is darkened by sin. And people tend to love darkness more than light (John 3:19). But the true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world (John 1:9). “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

All we need to do is light a lamp and keep the candle burning. “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.... 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” (Matt. 5:14b, 16). So do not be afraid to confess Christ. Do not deny him. Your life is not all about you. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). He must increase, and we must decrease. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.