

John 1:19-34

The Gospel of John begins by announcing that God's Word, which brought all things into being, became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. John's Gospel presents us with a portrait of Jesus that is both engaging and profound. By identifying Jesus as the light of the world and good shepherd, the Gospel gives us accessible ways to begin thinking about who Jesus is, while inviting them to go deeper, so that we continue growing in our understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to be related to God through him. The purpose of the Gospel is that people might have faith, and faith is a relationship of trust in God and Jesus Christ. People were created for relationship with God, and as the Gospel tells the story of Jesus in compelling ways, it helps to bring people into that relationship.

John's Gospel is based on the testimony of "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The Gospel does not identify this disciple by name. Many early Christian writers and believers thought he was John the son of Zebedee, although recent scholars have concluded that the beloved disciple's identity remains unknown. The Gospel of John was written after the death of the beloved disciple. John was the last Gospel completed, a few years later than the Synoptic gospels.

Yet, the image many of us have of John the Baptist comes from his memorable depiction in the Synoptic Gospels.

He appears in the desert as a fiery prophet, an Elijah-like figure who wears clothes made of camel's hair, eats grasshoppers and honey, preaches a message of repentance, yells at the brood of vipers, and baptizes all who take his message to heart.

The Baptist we find this morning, is a bit different from the Synoptic presentations. His introduction says nothing about his dress, his food, his message of repentance, or his baptizing activity. It focusses on his “testimony.”

The word “testimony” as used in the original Greek, refers to speech about what one has seen. It is prominently used in legal settings, both ancient and modern. Fittingly, a trial motif, that runs through John’s Gospel (with Jesus being the one put on trial) is introduced with the arrival of priests and Levites sent to interrogate the Baptist.

The Jewish emissaries seek from John an answer to the question, “Who are you?” In response, John outright denies he is the Messiah. The narration puts on John’s lips what it had informed the reader in the prologue, that John himself is not the light. His denial is introduced in a redundant fashion. “He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed” for emphasis. It underscores the importance of right identification of the Messiah, as is reinforced by John’s use of “I am not” in his response, which contrasts Jesus’ messianic use of

“I am” statements later in the Gospel.

The question posed to John belies the quest for a saviour or deliverer which recurs throughout human history, a quest for “the hero.” This hero can be referred to as “the secret saviour,” which conveys the sense of communal surprise in the identity of the deliverer: the saviour is not who one would expect, but the opposite. History is full of such examples: Samuel, David, Amos, Jesus, Muhammad, and Joan of Arc.

However, today we are not looking for a secret saviour. We want the “obvious operator.” We want someone large and in charge. We have a set of expectations and certain criteria that must be met if we are to believe in someone, just like the Jewish people did, and others through history. Too often we want the person with the biggest profile, without asking if someone else might be better for our situation. We Christians too frequently look for the famous, the loudest, and confuse it with the faithful: politicians (we can all think of some examples), televangelists, talk show hosts, and influencers.

John's Gospel was composed in a context where the identity of Jesus was disputed. Some considered claims that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God to be incompatible with Jewish tradition. This created friction between Christians and synagogue members

who did not share their views. A central issue in the debate was whether Jesus was really from God or whether his claim to be one with God was blasphemy. Accordingly, the Gospel emphasizes that Jesus works in harmony with God by giving life to people as the Creator does. Jesus speaks the truth about his relationship with God when he uses the divine name "I Am" for himself.

The experience of conflict is reflected in the attention the Gospel gives to questions about Jesus' identity. The Gospel allows readers to hear people challenge Jesus' claims and to listen to Jesus' replies. There are intense discussions of what it means to testify rightly and to judge with right judgment. The experience of conflict helped to shape a Gospel that is passionately committed to the question of truth.

At the same time, the Christian community had become more ethnically diverse by the time this Gospel was written, now including people of Jewish, Samaritan, and Greek background. Distinctions between Jews and Gentiles fade as the Gospel speaks broadly of the opposition that comes from "the world" and of God's love for "the world." In order to communicate Jesus' identity to a widening readership, the Gospel uses language that would have been broadly accessible. Jesus is identified as the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, and the true vine – imagery that was

rooted in Israel's Scriptures yet engaging to a diverse readership. This helps the Gospel remain a compelling book for readers even today.

In John's Gospel, no category other than "witness to the light" suits John the Baptist, who quotes Isaiah to identify himself as the medium through which testimony is spoken. The Synoptic accounts use this verse to describe John, but by having John name himself as "the voice," the Fourth Gospel calls attention to his primary role as witness, that is, one who testifies about what she or he has seen. In the Fourth Gospel, John prepares the way of the Lord not by baptizing but by testifying or witnessing to the truth he has seen in Jesus.

When asked as to the purpose of his baptizing, John turns attention away from himself to Jesus. He mentions his baptizing activity briefly, and he discusses it more fully after the priests and Levites left. He explains that its purpose is to witness to Jesus, "that he might be revealed to Israel."

The bulk of his response is spent anticipating Jesus, the unknown hero or secret saviour, who is among them but unknown, who is to come after John, and whose significance exceeds John's. John's inquisitors are left with less knowledge of who John is (he is "the

voice") than who he is not (the Messiah, Elijah, the Mosaic prophet). Upon further questioning, John rejects his identification with two figures expected as messianic forerunners, Elijah and a prophet in the tradition of Moses. This is a notable point of difference between John and the Synoptics, which tend to introduce the inquisitors to a figure they did not ask about in the first place, Jesus. John's words and actions are wholly directed toward making Jesus known.

Jesus appears for the first time in the Gospel narrative, but it is John who is doing all the talking. On this "next day," Jesus is there simply to provide the catalyst for John's testimony, for John's "voice." In contrast to the first day of John's testimony, no audience is specified. John speaks to anyone willing to listen, testifying to Jesus' christological significance and doctrine of salvation before Jesus takes an active role in the story. John's witness here will be developed and unpacked over the course of the Gospel.

According to John, Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The lamb imagery is reminiscent of Revelation and blends the depiction of the suffering servant in Isaiah with the paschal lamb sacrifices that commemorated God's salvation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

John's Gospel presents Jesus, who in John is crucified at the same

time as the lambs are slaughtered for Passover, as another saving act of God, this time to liberate the world from sin. Here, “Sin” is singular, signifying that, according to the Fourth Gospel’s doctrine of salvation, Jesus’ messiahship is salvific not because he saves believers from individual sinful acts but because he liberates all people from the sinful human condition that alienates them from God.

To downplay his own importance, John also tells about Jesus’ preexistence, a christological claim introduced in the prologue that we heard last Sunday. Though John appears first in the Gospel story, Jesus has priority over John both in status and time.

Using imagery familiar from the synoptic baptism accounts (though without admitting that John baptized Jesus), John says he saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and “remain” on Jesus. He uses the perfect tense of the verb to introduce what he saw (“I have seen”), which indicates the Spirit still remains with Jesus (in Greek this verb tense denotes a past action that still has its effect or continues in the present).

This, along with John’s testimony that Jesus “baptizes with the Holy Spirit,” reflects the Gospel’s *pneumatology*, that is, the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit remains with Jesus until Jesus himself

passes it unto the believer. John ends his testimony by identifying Jesus as “the Son of God,” one of the key christological affirmations of the Fourth Gospel.

The John of John's Gospel is never called the Baptist. Rather, this is John the Witness. While he is described as doing some general baptizing here and there, a careful read of John's story of Jesus' baptism reveals that John does not baptize Jesus. His primary role is not as one who baptizes but one who testifies to the light coming into the world, a very human witness to a cosmic event. God is about ordering a new creation, a new presence of light in the world but it necessitates a fellow human to point to its presence, otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it. That human is John.

John's Gospel presents John the Baptist as having a clear sense of who he is and who he is not, of his role in manifesting God's work on earth, of God's presence and revelation when he sees it, and of his life's work as a testimony to that revelation. He baptizes not to cleanse people from sin but to witness to God's presence in the world.

They came to the river seeking, asking, hoping.
At the edge of the Jordan, they stood.

Some were wondering, Could this be the one? The messiah, the Christ, the saviour of the nation?

Some were hoping, Could it be my turn? Could this be the time my broken past is washed away and cleansed and healed? Some were questioning, Why does he do this? This is a waste of time, if he is not the One - which he obviously isn't. Splash - more water, another woman baptised, another man coming up from the river with hope, another child given an experience of faith.

He paused - I imagine him laughing. The fourth Gospel's Baptiser isn't a hell-fire preacher. There are no calls to repent, no accusations of a brood of vipers of the hypocrites who pile on regulations for people who are just trying to live faithfully. John speaks plainly - I'm not the one. I'm not even those other ones.

I make the Word known, but I'm not the Word. In the beginning was the Word. I am a voice. I'm the signpost, not the destiny. I'm the broom cleaning the house, not the visitor.

The John the Baptist we find in John's Gospel shows how what we do reveals to others what we believe. Have we reflected on our individual identities enough to have a sense of the talents we have, and those we do not have?

Can we carry on the work of God in our own particular contexts? Are we aware of the sort of God we reveal to the world by our words and actions? Do our acts witness to a God who takes away that which alienates people from God and each other, and does so not by militant violence but by sacrifice? Do they reveal a God who remains present in the world?

Or do our acts witness to a different sort of God altogether? The presentation of John the Baptist in today's Gospel challenges us to examine how our actions testify to our beliefs, and what beliefs we present to the world. How can **we** best witness to the light of the world?

Amen.