

Rev. Kenneth J. Rodrigue
St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
17 December 2023

Sermon on John 1:6-8,19-28

Worship Theme:

THE KING SHALL COME – BRINGING PERFECT JOY

Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is an emotion. Joyfulness is a condition. Happiness comes from your circumstances. Joyfulness comes from your King entering into your heart and assuring you of his abiding love and your glorious future. Therefore, happiness is fleeting, but the joyfulness our King brings endures forever!

Sermon Theme: “A Witness to the Light”

Grace, and mercy, and peace – all these have been freely given to you by God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN!

There's a new preacher in town. You probably noticed there's a definite buzz about it. Everyone's talking and they all have questions. Everyone wants to know what there is to know about this guy. They've heard a few things here and there, some of them intriguing and perhaps even a bit strange, but for the most part, he's still a mystery. They heard he would be preaching, so they all decided to go and discover what he's all about. On the way they ask one another, “What do you suppose he will say?” When they get there and finally meet him, they're bursting with curiosity and questions, but the root question everyone really wants to ask and find the answer to is: “Who are you?”

Even those who had never even seen him before knew one thing: his name was John. But imagine if upon their arrival, this is the message they heard: “Everyone, I want to thank you all for coming today. I know things haven't been as good as you would have liked and I know you've been waiting a long time for someone to come who will fix everything and make it right again. Well, I'm delighted to tell you that your troubles are over – here I am!”

What an incredibly DREADFUL message that would be – talk about tooting your own horn! For thousands of years people had been looking forward, eagerly awaiting the day the Messiah, the chosen Savior of the world, would come. It was (or at least should have been) painfully obvious that there were problems that would never be solved by anyone less than him. They were sinners! Yes, these were the chosen people of God, but as long as they took in the oxygen of planet earth, they were going to still be sinners too.

And they could do nothing to change that. Oh they tried. They tried so many different things: work harder, try harder, keep God's commands, or better yet, make MORE commands so there are extra rules to keep. Surely that will fix our problems! But they soon found out what everyone learns eventually – more rules don't fix bad behavior. More commands weren't the answer to sin, and actually accomplished the opposite, creating more sin than there had been before.

The people were stuck. There hadn't been a prophet from God in 400 years and they were in a very bad place, something the prophet Isaiah had called "the land of deep darkness." [cf. ch. 9] But then the whisperings began of someone new in town – a preacher – and a fairly powerful one at that. Could this be HIM – the one for whom they had been waiting so long for?

Imagine their shock and surprise then when this was John's message: "*I am NOT the Messiah.*" ...what? Then what are we all doing here?! Why did we drag ourselves out into the wilderness, away from all the comforts of home, just to listen to a guy who only now is telling us he isn't the answer we all hoped he would be! Imagine if you called a new pastor to serve your congregation and all he could do was tell you all the things he's NOT good at! It would have been so easy (and perhaps incredibly tempting) for John to simply go along with their assumptions about him and tell them what they wanted to hear. He could have said, "Yes, dear people, I am the one you've been waiting for. All is well now, take heart and have peace." But he didn't and he couldn't. Not only was he not the Messiah, but he also wasn't anyone else they thought he might be. He was, seemingly, a nobody.

So after several rounds of "who are you?!", they finally asked this: "*What do you say about yourself?*" And now he could tell them. He was **A Witness to the Light**, *the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'make straight the way for the Lord'.* The people had been focused on the wrong person. John had come as **A Witness to the Light**, but the people were distracted because all they wanted was to know more about the witness! What a dangerous slippery slope.

A dangerous slippery slope that, sadly, we also are far too familiar with. Maybe we hear a phrase like "**A Witness to the Light**" and we too are more curious about the witness than we are about the light. Our focus can so easily be lost and misguided, and we look for peace and comfort and joy in places where it can't be found, at least not in any lasting way. We take comfort knowing that our church has the right number of pastors, or that we clearly have the "best" pastor. We find peace knowing there won't be any vacancies in our school and that the number of families in it will continue to grow in such a way that we feel good about ourselves but our resources also don't get taxed too far. We find joy when people fill the slots on every board and committee so that everything we've been wanting to happen is now finally happening – people are perfectly cared for, the building has no more issues, and everything in our church is finally 100% exactly the way it should be.

Except for one problem, of course. Just like God's people of 2,000 years ago, we let our focus be consumed by "the witness" to the point where John has to hit us over the head with the words "*among you stands one you do not know.*" Now please don't misunderstand me – serving the body of believers in any way is a tremendous privilege and people who step into those positions are wonderful blessings from God and we thank him for every one of them. But we dare not become so focused on the witnesses that the Light could be standing right among us and we wouldn't recognize him or know it.

The danger is indescribable. Because, whether we've known each other for

years or whether we just met, whether we're talking about people in the Holy Land in Bible times or whether we're talking about life-long citizens of the midwestern United States, there's one thing we all know about each other: we're sinners. And if there's one thing we can always count on a sinner to do, it's keep sinning. And that problem in each one of our lives will never be solved by just a witness, because the witness stands just as sinful as anyone else. The only true answer and solution to the problem of the spiritual darkness which has plagued humanity since there were only two of us is THE LIGHT.

If the Light were only as good as the witness, it wouldn't be much help or benefit to us. But the Lord didn't give us a subpar light; he gave us the Light of the World himself. John the Gospel-writer (not the same as John the Baptist!) loved the phrase "Light of the World", and it often shows up throughout his Gospel account and his three letters. Perhaps the greatest reason for this isn't really all that profound – the Light of the World (which is Jesus, of course!) referred to himself as such! He is the Light who came to take away the darkness of sin and unbelief, not only from a select few, but from all the people of the world.

God knew we could never discover him for ourselves and we would be left floundering in our sin and unbelief forever if he himself didn't do something. So at a time when our focus was everywhere except in the most important place, God redirected our focus by explaining the purpose for which this new preacher in town had come – he came as A Witness to the Light so that all might believe.

Bringing light has always been the work of God, even back to the very beginning of time. In the beginning when nothing else had been made yet, there was darkness. The very first thing God tells us he made is light. *God said, "Let there be light!", and there was light.* [Gen. 1] While in Genesis God was creating physical light for the physical world, his actions of creating and sending light did not stop there. After the fall into sin when Adam and Eve disobeyed the perfect God who made them, thereby casting the entire world out of holiness and into sinfulness which can only lead to unspeakable eternal suffering in hell, God decided to fix it again. The sinfulness of humanity cast the world into a spiritual darkness from which we could never save ourselves. So God Almighty again sent Light. This time it wasn't the sun or moon. It was himself, and his witness John the Baptist had the amazing privilege of getting everyone ready for that Light!

Maybe that doesn't sound like a big deal to you, or maybe at this point you're thinking "I've heard this all before, so if this is all the new preacher is going to talk about, maybe I can spend my time better doing something else." But dear brothers and sisters in Jesus, don't miss this – the Light changes everything for us! This is not a trivial bit of information or an insignificant time of the year! Anyone who's been around the block a time or two knows how insanely busy December is, and everything that's clamoring for our attention claims to be "most" important. But only one thing truly is: the Light of the World who gives us the light of life.

Isaiah the Prophet said it this way in ch. 9:2: "*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*" The difference between dark and light is remarkable, to say the

least. It's nearly impossible to describe sufficiently – it just has to be experienced. If you had never before seen light and had lived your entire life in darkness so far, just imagine how much of a letdown it would be if someone sat with you for a while, told you how amazing light is, and then left. You would feel devastated and disappointed, because they told you all about this awesome light but you still have no idea what it's like to see it!

So God didn't do that. He sent countless witnesses and wrote down his holy Word to not only tell us about the Light, but to also make it part of our experience. He sent Jesus the Light of the World to bring us into the light of life. Yes, we were walking in the darkness of sin and unbelief, as Isaiah so pointedly said. But now a light has dawned and the one who stands among us is not unknown to us anymore. John the Baptist wasn't the Messiah, but Jesus is! He came to be the Savior of all, living a perfect life of obedience in our place, removing our sins forever by his holy death on the cross, and promising us eternal peace and lasting joy in the glorious home he has prepared for us in heaven. He changes our lives in a priceless way, for every day he blesses us with here on earth and for the timelessness of eternity. Because if there's one thing we can count on a Savior to do, it's keep saving.

Well, turns out the rumors are true – there's a new preacher in town. But don't focus so much on the **witness to the Light** that you miss the **Light** itself. If someone sat down with you, spent a long time describing light to you, and then turned on a light for you to see, yes, you would be so thankful to that person, but then you would focus on the light! Dearly-loved children of God, that privilege is ours today and every day we have in this world. Thank God for the witnesses in your life who faithfully show you the Light. Carry out the joyful privilege we all have of being witnesses who can show the Light to others. And as we do all these things, we follow the wise advice of a man named John and we keep our faith always focused on the one true Light. Jesus is coming, our perfect Savior from sin, the Light of the World who comes so that all may believe and be saved. For his unending mercy and grace, to God alone be the glory forever and ever. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.