

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Sometimes, in our highly polarized world, we may have the impression that differences inevitably lead to conflict and division. It doesn't have to be that way. It's certainly not the way of the Lord, not even with two very different people — Jesus and John the Baptist, for the way of the Lord is singular in focus: our salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Indeed, the Evangelist John makes it clear that his Gospel is about Jesus and that His Gospel has a purpose. “[T]hese [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). And so he begins his Gospel with the majestic words reaching back to eternity, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” (John 1:1). “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). We'll hear those words again on Christmas Day.

Nevertheless, in the first chapter of the Evangelist John's Gospel he stitches the story of another character into Jesus' story. We hear of another man, a man by the name of John, not the Evangelist, for he never names himself in his Gospel, but the John who was “*baptizing*” “*in Bethany across the Jordan.*” He started with Jesus, but then speaks about John the Baptist. And so it goes in the first chapter of John: Jesus then John ... Jesus then John.

That doesn't mean that, like quilters try to do today, John keeps his stitches even. He doesn't, but the pattern is there, and that sets up a contrast between Jesus and John. The Word was God; John was merely a man. The Word was πρὸς τὸν θεόν — with God (John 1:1); John was sent παρὰ θεοῦ — from God. Jesus is the “*true light, which gives light to everyone*” (John 1:9); John came to bear witness to the light. Jesus is flesh, but also “*the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” who ranks before and was before John for He is God eternal (John 1:14-15); John is but a man born of a father and mother in the ordinary way (Luke 1:13). Jesus is identified as “*the Christ*” (John 1:41) by Andrew, Simon Peter's brother; John explicitly “*confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’*” Jesus is identified as the Prophet, “*of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote*” (John 1:45); John denies that he is the Prophet with a simple, “*No.*” Jesus is the Lord; John is the “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’*”

That's quite a contrast between Jesus and John, and outside of the Gospel of John we could name more — “*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’*” — and yet this is a contrast without conflict, for each knew his purpose.

Jesus came in the flesh to bring “*grace and truth*” (John 1:17); He came that we “*might have life and have it abundantly,*” the good shepherd laying “*down His life for the sheep*” (John 10:10-11). Jesus came to fulfill God’s promise of sending a Savior, the Christ, a King, to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37), to be “*the way, the truth, and the life,*” the way back to the Father (John 14:6).

John also knew his purpose. John was a man sent from God with a commission: to be a witness. From before his miraculous birth, John’s father Zechariah was told who his son was going to be: one who would “*turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [who would] go before [the Lord, not as Elijah himself, but] in the spirit and power of Elijah, [who would] turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, [who would] make ready for the Lord a people prepared*” (Luke 1:16-17). And when John was born, Zechariah sang out prophetic words about his son: “*you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace*” (Luke 1:76-79). No doubt, Zechariah communicated this message to John many times as he grew up. John knew his purpose. He was to be a witness.

And so he was. Baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, John became a witness. He saw “*the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and [remain] on him*” (John 1:32). But more than being an eyewitness, John was also an ear witness. John heard the voice from heaven. The Evangelist John doesn’t say he heard the Father say of Jesus, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*” (Matt. 3:17), but he does record that the Father said to John, “*He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit*” (John 1:33). With this seeing and hearing, John became a witness.

John was commissioned by God to be a witness of His Son, a witness commissioned “*to bear witness.*” John accomplished this purpose, too, for John preached, for John was “*the prophet of the Most High*” — as I said on Wednesday, that’s what the prophetic office is. It’s a speaking and preaching office. God revealed the identity of Jesus to John, and John proclaimed it. Of Jesus, John said, “*I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God*” (John 1:34). Moreover, the next day, John saw Jesus again, coming toward him, and exclaimed, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29)! “*This is the One, the One I was commissioned to proclaim: the Light, ‘the sunrise [who is visiting] us from on high to give light to [us] who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,’ just as my father had prophesied by the Holy Spirit*” (Luke 1:67,

78-79). “And this is how He will give light to everyone by bringing salvation to all in the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:77).

God had a purpose for His Son and for John, too. God’s purpose in sending His Son has been said today already in many ways: to be a light in darkness; to bring salvation through forgiveness; to be the perfect sacrificial lamb, laying down His life bearing the sins of the world. This purpose we know Jesus accomplished, and we know it in part because of John’s testimony.

But God wants more than just for us to know these things. He wants us to believe them, as the Evangelist said, “*these were written that you may believe ... and ... have life.*” This was God’s purpose in commissioning the witness of John the Baptist, too. The Evangelist tells us John “*came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, [so] that all might believe through him.*” This expresses God’s desire throughout the Gospel of John. You know many of these verses, a sample from John’s Gospel: “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). “*We believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world*” (John 4:42). “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life*” (John 5:24). “*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent*” (John 6:29). “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life*” (John 6:47). “*Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*” (John 11:25-26). “*While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light*” (John 12:36). And more.

Jesus and John ... two very different people, yet hand in glove these two worked together — Jesus to effect our salvation; John to bear witness to the light: Jesus and His work, and all this that all might believe and be saved — “*grace upon grace*” (John 1:16).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.