

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

John may have been a “transitional person” in the Gospel story, as we heard last week, but John was significant enough in the story of Jesus to merit a second Sunday in Advent. And we see that transition in this week’s Gospel. Last week, it was John the forerunner of Christ, the messenger sent to prepare the way of Christ, sent to prepare us by his preaching of repentance—“and let us all our hearts prepare for Christ to come and enter there”; this week it is John the witness who bears witness about Christ—“Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding! ‘Christ is near,’ we hear it say.”

And there is nary a word of repentance in our texts today—confession, yes, but not repentance, not a call for us to confess our sins, but to confess Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who was with God in the beginning and who is God, through whom all things were made, to confess the One in whom there is life, the One who is the light of men, the One who overcomes the darkness. This week we hear John bear witness about the One who is the truth and who came to deliver to us the Father’s grace.

This week is about the contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist—not just the contrast of Mark’s emphasis on John’s wilderness preaching and baptizing with John the Evangelist’s emphasis on John’s bearing witness to Jesus—but the contrast of who Jesus and John the Baptist are.

The contrast takes place in the first chapter of John’s Gospel; it’s a majestic text that transports us from the unsearchable eternity of God the Word before the beginning, before anything had even been made, to the coming of the Word made flesh, who made His dwelling among sinful flesh. You know we’ll hear more of this from John on Christmas Day.

The contrast takes place as another story is woven into the story of the Word—it’s the story of a voice. Woven into the story of the eternal God sent down from heaven to become man is the story of *“a man sent from God, whose name was John.”* Yes, the “Lord is gracious,” for that’s what John means. The Lord was gracious to John’s parents, who had been unable to have children, and John’s father Zechariah, after a bit of a stumble, believed God and named his son, John, as instructed.

This John, though, was but a man. He was not God, but a man whose gift it was to “meet” the *“Lord,”* even as our Savior was growing in the womb of His mother, the blessed Virgin. And John knew it even though he was only six months older than his cousin, and was himself still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. John knew it then, and bore witness already in the only way he knew how—with an extraordinary leap of joy in his mother’s womb.

In the midst of his telling of the coming of the Word, of the Light, of the only Son from the Father, the Evangelist tells us the story of a man sent from God to be

a witness. He was a messenger sent from God, yet he came not as an angel, as his purpose might suggest. He was a man, the Evangelist says, that he might be distinguished as one who shared only the humanity of the One to whom he bore witness, that John might be distinguished from the man who came after him, the One who took humanity and united it in His Divine personhood.

John was a man only and not the light, sent to bear witness to the Light. The Evangelist is making a contrast here between the transitory voice of John and the eternally-begotten Word of God. The one was a “morning star appearing at the dawning of the kingdom of heaven” (John Scotus Eriugena), heralding the other. The other was “*the Sun of righteousness [rising] with healing in His wings*” (Malachi 4:2) “*the sunrise [that would] visit us from on high*” (Luke 1:78). The one was the witness, the prophet of the Most High. The other was the Most High Himself about whom the voice testified. The one was a messenger sent from God; the other the divine Message Himself who came down from heaven. The one was a witness to the light. The other was the true light that was coming into the world, the brilliant light that enlightens the whole world, the light that neither the devil nor the darkness of our sin or death could overcome.

John came as a witness, to bear witness . . . , that all might believe through him—believe in this Light, believe in the Lord whose way John had come to “*make straight,*” believe in the tender mercy of our God, believe in mankind’s salvation through the forgiveness of sins. This is the purpose of the Church’s witness, too. We bear witness “that in Christ [God has] reconciled [the world] to [Himself]” with a purpose: that in the hearing of “the good news of . . . salvation,” the Holy Spirit might work faith in them, that they “may receive the gift of salvation” (Collect for the Mission of the Church).

Now John was a particularly powerful witness to the Lord. Indeed, so powerful was his message and so popular that the Jews sent priests and Levites to John to ask, “*Who are you?*” (thinking perhaps that he himself was the long-awaited Christ).

John did not flinch at their question. His was no coy response. He didn’t use any of the multitudes of techniques that modern day politicians use to wriggle out of answering a “gotcha” question. No, true to his prophetic vocation, he simply confessed; he did not deny but confessed. And, as good confessions do—like the Nicene Creed does—“begotten, not made,” he confessed in both the negative and the affirmative.

“*Who are you?*” he was asked. He confessed in the negative: “*I am not the Christ.*” “*What then? Are you Elijah?*” “*I am not,*” he confessed—even though the angel told Zechariah that he would have “*the spirit and power of Elijah.*” “*Are you the Prophet?*” they asked him, that is, are you the promised prophet like Moses to whom the people should listen (Deut. 18:15). “*No,*” he confessed.

Then “*Who are you?*” his interlocutors pressed. “*What do you say about yourself?*” This question required a confession in the affirmative, and so John did. He did not deny but confessed, “*I am the voice ... [making] ‘straight the way of the Lord’.*” John’s witness bears witness to these priests and Levites (and to us) that he is not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. The Evangelist makes the contrasts. The Baptist is not the Word of God, but the voice of a man pointing us to the Christ. He is not “*the Prophet,*” but he is the “*prophet of the Most High*” God, preparing for His coming. He is not the Light, but he is the voice that bears witness to the “*true light, which gives light to everyone*” (John 1:9), to Jesus, “*the Light of the world*” (John 8:12). John is not the Savior, but by his voice proclaims to us salvation in Christ, giving us the “*knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of your sins*” (Luke 1:77). John is not the one who takes away the sins of the world, but is the finger that points to Jesus and the voice that proclaims Him to be “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*” (John 1:29). John is not seeking his own glory as he baptizes, but is the voice proclaiming the glory of the One who comes after him, “*the strap of whose sandal [he is] not worthy to untie,*” the One who would baptize with water filled with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8, John 3:5, Acts 2:38).

But now, how about you? Who are you? What do you have to say about yourself? John confessed and did not deny, but confessed His unworthiness. What do you confess? May you likewise confess that you are not the Christ. You are not the eternal Word; you are not the maker of all things; you are not perfect; you are not all-powerful; you are not God. May you not deny but confess that you are poor, miserable sinners, who offend God by your sin and justly deserve His punishment, who are unworthy servants even when you have done all that has been commanded you (Luke 17:10).

And may you also confess with the prophets and apostles that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13). Indeed, another voice preaches this truth to you. He, too, is but a man—the Biblical contrast still applies. And like John, he is a man sent by God through you His church, though admittedly a man of stature far less than he whom Jesus called the greatest born of women (Matthew 11:11). But your pastor has been sent, and therefore, has been authorized to preach the glorious truths of God’s salvation in Christ Jesus to you, that you may hear and believe, for “*faith comes from hearing... the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17). He has been authorized to baptize for the sake of Christ’s kingdom, making disciples of all nations, authorized to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, the living voice of the Gospel to sinners yearning for peace with God, authorized to serve you Christ’s very body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. Yes, your pastor is an unworthy man, but thanks be to God, this grace does not depend on his worthiness, but on the worthiness of the Word made flesh, of Christ, the Lamb who was slain for you.

So listen to the voice of John the Baptist, and to your own pastor. John points you to the Word; make sure your pastor always does. Indeed, may you confess and not deny but confess that your God, the Incarnate Word, has come down from heaven for you as your Savior, that He comes today to build you up by His Gospel, and to feed you with His body and blood in His supper, and that He will come again one day to give you the fullness of eternal life. Listen to these voices; but believe in the Word.

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