

John 1:6-8,19-34

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord"',
as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

(Sermon begins with an audio excerpt from the movie *Godspell* (1973), starting at 7:28.

The lyrics are “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”).

“There was a man sent by God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

John the Baptist starts preaching at the Jordan river, the edge of the land that God gave to the Hebrew people, and baptizing people who ask for it. Baptism predates Christianity. Hebrew people who had sinned so badly that they did not deserve any more to be considered one of God’s people could be baptized, symbolically dying and being reborn. John was doing that at the Jordan, so that the baptized could then re-enter Judea as new people.

All the people keep asking John if he is the Messiah. The people are desperate for a Messiah, and there are actually a number of pretenders to the throne wandering around, men who claim to be the Messiah. The vast majority of the people know that those pretenders aren't real, though, and they are still looking for the real thing.

An artist from Melbourne named Nigel Hanscamp put it this way:

“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.”¹

John is very clear about who he is, and who he is not. He is very clear about what he is here to do. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness. He is here to point to Jesus, and to tell people to “Prepare Ye The Way of the Lord.”

Then, one day, John sees Jesus coming, and he says, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I've been preparing you for.”

John does not first say, “This is your King.”

John does not first say, “This is the Anointed One, the Messiah.”

John first says, “This is the Lamb of God.”

Here's the thing about a lamb. Lambs, in the Hebrew mind at the time, were not just cute, frolicky, little critters. Lambs were sacrificed. At the Passover feast every year, lamb was and is the centerpiece of the menu. And John says, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

¹ Facebook post in the closed group “Narrative Lectionary.” December 30, 2017.

After that, John testifies that he himself has baptized Jesus, and that the Spirit descended from Heaven onto him. John testifies that Jesus is the Son of God.

Later, John keeps preaching that the people of Jerusalem, and King Herod and the chief priests in particular, are not up to God's standards. He does not do any miracles himself,² but he keeps pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God and as the Son of God. He keeps doing that, even at the risk of his own life. Eventually, John is thrown in prison and executed, because he will not stop telling the truth in the face of a king and a court who cannot handle the truth.³

There was a congregation sent by God, whose name was Westminster. It came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through it. Westminster itself was not the light, but it came into the world to testify to the light.

This congregation, just like every other congregation of God's Church universal from tiny house churches to megachurches in stadiums, does not exist for its own sake. This congregation, just like every other part of God's Church that has ever existed, does not exist to make me happy, or to make you happy. William Temple said that, "The Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members." This congregation, just like every other part of God's Church from the Adamites to the Waldensians, exists to point to Jesus Christ and to do his will in the world.

That is literally the only reason for the Church to exist. This congregation, the one across the street, ... any and all congregations of God's Church anywhere in the world. These congregations of God's Church are all very different, but, when we are at our best, each doing what we were created to do, we are all pointing to Jesus Christ from our various directions.

² John 10:41.

³ Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29. Acknowledged in Luke 9:9.

This congregation is called to keep pointing to Jesus Christ and doing his will in the world, even at the risk of its own life.⁴

There were people sent by God, with various names. They came as witnesses to testify to the light, so that all might believe through them. They themselves were not the light, but they came to testify to the light.

You do not exist for your own sake. The purpose of your life is not to be happy. The purpose of your life is not to make yourself happy or to make someone else happy. The purpose of your life is not your spouse, or your children. Or it is not limited to your spouse and your children.

The purpose of your life is not to acquire money and possessions. Despite what the media will tell you, a human being's worth is far more than the sum of his or her possessions.⁵

You all know that. None of this is news.

The purpose of humanity, as the Westminster Catechism explained to those of us who read it when we were young, "is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."⁶ We do that by worshipping God, and by striving to be near God through doing God's will in the world, even if that seems risky.

We do that by participating in worship services, but that is not enough. We do that by private prayer, and prayer with our families.

We do that by studying the Bible for ourselves, and thinking about what it says.

We do that by loving God, and by loving our neighbors.

⁴ "The Confession of 1967," in *The Book of Confessions*.

⁵ To be blunt, the Star Trek culture the Ferengi are wrong, even comical. http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Rules_of_Acquisition.

⁶ "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," Q. 1., in *The Book of Confessions*, 7.001.

We love God and love our neighbors by what we do in the world, and by how we do it.

Loving our neighbors is more than some abstract thing, divorced from the real world.

Loving our neighbors is more than saying that we love them. If that is all we do, than I regret to say, it is a lie.

Loving our neighbors requires paying attention, even if we do not expect to like what we see.

Loving our neighbors requires listening to them, listening more than we speak, even if we expect them to say something we do not want to hear.

Loving our neighbors requires speaking the truth, even if our voice shakes.

Loving our neighbors may require giving up something. An extra coat. A parking space. Some time. Our position as the authority in a situation.

Loving our neighbors may require risking something. Looking ignorant. Looking foolish.

Loving our neighbors may require losing something. Some material possessions. A sense of superiority. Confidence that you can handle anything on your own.

We can't know whether these things will be required, until we're in the situation. That's the risk involved in love.

But, if we love God, we will love our neighbors, children of God made in God's own image. And we'll take those risks. Because love is worth it.

Love may cause us to lose some things. Anxiety. Worry. Hopelessness.

Love may cause us to gain some things. Friends. Calm. Hope. A feeling of purpose.

Love will cause us to gain some things. Love. Peace. Assurance that we don't have to handle everything on our own.

You see, no matter how the individual risk comes out, God loves us. Jesus will walk with us, even to the end of the age.

Tomorrow morning, we will start a new year. 2018 may bring any number of things, but I guarantee you that it will bring some changes. That is the nature of life, whether we like it or not.

Many people make New Years Resolutions. Whether you make formal resolutions or not, try in the next year to let your love for God and for your neighbors show.

Worship God regularly. Here and elsewhere in your life.

Take some risks for love of God and your neighbors.

Point to Jesus Christ with your life.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

AMEN.