

Sermon: Testimony Given

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, John 1:6-8, 19-28**

Once again we turn to Isaiah for a word of promise and proclamation. The promise is that righteousness and praise will spring up before all the nations through the people of Israel, the people of faith. The proclamation reverses all suffering and announces justice and comfort to all the world.

Our Gospel reading from John is full of challenges, as the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem try to figure out who this John the baptizer might really be.

In the first-century, Israel and Judah were loaded with people claiming to be prophets and Messiahs. The ground was thick with them. False prophets and Messiahs were enough of a problem that the religious leaders in Jerusalem felt the need to track down the latest rumors whenever they came up, and that's why they sent some priests and Levites to check out John the baptizer. Levites were assistants to the priests from the time of Aaron and Moses. They had the authority to ask questions.

At the same time, everyone was expecting the imminent return of Elijah. Stories about John and, soon enough, Jesus, caused a lot of interest. What if it were true? What if this guy out in the desert *was* Elijah; what if he was the Messiah? How would that play out with the Romans? Or with the Zealots, that political group that was always causing trouble? A false Messiah was bad enough, but having the real one on the loose could be equally disastrous. The real Messiah would try to overthrow Rome. Except no one expected Rome to lose.

The questions they asked John are also questions that Jesus will face down the road: 'Who *are* you? And he volunteered the information that he wasn't the Messiah. But they persisted: 'Are you Elijah?' 'No.' 'The prophet?' 'No.' Then they asked, 'Who are *you*? What do you say about *yourself*?' So, John quotes Isaiah. Then they ask him the best question: 'Why then are you baptizing?' And he gives them the best non-answer: 'I baptize with water.'

What the priests and Levites don't know, but we do, is that they are talking to 'a man *sent from God*.' John the baptizer's authority as a witness outweighs the authority of the priests and Levites. John the evangelist's Gospel includes seven witnesses to Jesus; John the baptizer is but the first.

Why would anyone need to witness to Jesus Christ, to testify, to tell his story? Basically, because someone had to do it. The message spread around the Mediterranean very quickly in the first century, spread not by social media but by word of mouth, by people telling the story to other people. It was a hard sell, too: the claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God was widely disputed, bringing ridicule and persecution to those who claimed it. Hence the need for witnesses.

John the baptizer's message was intended to lead people to faith – meaning, trust and reliance – in the Light, Jesus Christ. All who come to faith in Jesus, including all of us here this morning, are indirectly dependent on John the baptizer's testimony.

It occurred to me the other day that, for the most part, characters in the situation comedies and dramas shown on television very rarely actually watch television. The people *on* television don't seem to be obsessed *with* television. They're busy doing other things. They seem to have no concern about the day's news, real or fake, or with that in-between kind of news called 'truthiness,' which are things that logically seem true but actually have no evidence to prove them.

When I was a kid, it never occurred to me that what I was reading about the American Revolution might be false. I know now that scholarship never rests, and that what we know about something now, like the Battle of Yorktown or a particular passage in Scripture, is more than what we knew about it fifty or a hundred years ago. But it would never occur to me that what I was reading, or hearing in a newscast, might be a lie. So, now more than ever, seeing is believing.

But I wasn't at the Battle of Yorktown, nor was I on the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus walked by, calling his first disciples. But I have faith that there *was* a Battle of Yorktown and that George Washington commanded the troops that defeated Lord Cornwallis and his army. I also have faith in Jesus Christ because I trust in the witness of a man sent from God, whose name was John.

The road to Jesus begins with him.

Deep in the reading from Isaiah, we heard some challenging words from God. Initially, Isaiah is doing the talking, proclaiming what the Lord has sent him to do. But then, God speaks, in verse eight: ‘For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.’ Think of what God *didn’t* say but, I think, implied. What if the verse went like this:

‘For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.

What about you? Do *you* love justice and hate wrongdoing?

Do *you* share in my desires for your people?’

God will make, and has made, an everlasting *two-way* covenant with us. We are invited to join in that covenant. Just as a garden causes what is sown to spring up, so will God cause righteousness and praise – together – to spring up before all the nations.

Isaiah provides an image of God as fertile ground, and uses active language to describe what will spring up from it: good news to the poor, liberty proclaimed to the captives, comfort to those who mourn, the ruins of our broken hearts and bodies rebuilt, and a strong spirit. John the baptizer came as a witness to testify to the light of God-with-Us, Emmanuel, Jesus Christ, who will show us how it’s done.

Do we hear all of this as Good News? Not everyone in Galilee did and certainly not everyone today thinks so.

The Rev. Norman Theiss wrote that, ‘In one sense, we are all John the Baptists, trying to point to a gospel and a salvation that we do not adequately understand.’ To become effective witnesses ourselves, we need to spend some time with Jesus, absorbing his lessons and applying them to our own lives. To make the Word of God real for ourselves, we need to talk about it, pull it apart, struggle with it.

As individuals, we can’t save the world, we can’t solve its deepest problems, and we can’t build the perfect society, because we are all only human. It’s an incredible burden to carry if we think otherwise. But we are free to serve God to the best of our abilities, to be ourselves, to live into the purpose we were created by God to achieve.

John was a voice, sent by God, to bear witness to Jesus. We can do the same, to hear and believe the gospel, and point to Jesus, saying, ‘Here he is; come and see.’¹

Amen.

¹ John 1:46