

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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. *

A Question of Authority - December 13, 2020

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Who are you? Why are you here? Who said that you could do what you are doing? These are the issues confronting the man called John the baptizer. We are familiar with the story of John. He was the forerunner of Jesus. He was the one God chose to tell the world that the long awaited Messiah was about to begin his mission to save humanity.

John, as we know, was very different in both the way he appeared and also what he had to say. We learn from the other gospels that John dressed differently from most people. He ate food that was different from most people. He lived his life in a way that was very different from most of people. But most importantly, his message was very different from anything people were hearing back then.

John, you see, told it like it was. He had no problem speaking truth to anyone and everyone. He had no problem calling the system of the day highly corrupt and accusing the leadership of the day of rank hypocrisy. No problem demanding that people change their lives and treat each other with respect and dignity. And for actually being honest, he developed both a base of intense supporters as well as an army of people who wanted to kill him.

Such has always been the way with truth tellers, hasn't it? We are both fascinated and repelled by truth. The problem with truth is that should we believe it, it means we have to change. It is far easier to deny truth and pretend that everything is all right then to go through the laborious process of self examination and realize that we fall far short of the way we can and should be living.

This was especially true of the people of Israel. They knew very well who they were and what their mission was. The Israelites regarded themselves as God's special chosen people. They believed that God, the creator of the universe, has singled them out among all the peoples of the earth to be God's chosen ones. God gave them the Ten Commandments in order that they might be a living example to the world of how human beings should live with each other. They looked down upon anyone who was not Jewish. They considered themselves to be superior and morally upright compared with everybody else because their God favored them above all other human beings.

Imagine the surprise of the religious authorities when John the Baptizer started baptizing! Why would that be a surprising and upsetting? Well, back in John's day, baptism was a ritual intended for non-Jews. We often forget that God's plan to choose the Jews to be God's chosen people was actually very successful. There were many people call Gentiles who wished to become a part of the Jewish nation. And as part of their joining the Jewish nation, they would be baptized with water.

The problem, however, was that John was not baptizing Gentiles, John was baptizing his fellow Jews. This was very upsetting. Baptism was intended for non-Jews to start becoming part of the faith. Jews were considered to be already in. If John was baptizing Jews, that meant that John did not consider

them to be part of the people of God! To the religious authorities, that was highly offensive. It was like saying that God did not recognize God's own chosen people. John's message and actions were so different, I think it's easy to see why the religious leadership asked him on what authority he was doing what he was doing.

But questioning authority is a very natural, very human thing to do, especially when you are the authority being questioned. We all know how upside down our political world is being turned right now. The authority of the current administration was questioned by the American people on November 3rd and a significant majority of the people rejected that authority. Just like the Pharisees of John's day, some of the modern-day Pharisees in government, in business, and sadly, even in religion have put up a tremendous battle and enormous resistance to being questioned and rejected by the American people.

John the Baptizer was a catalyst. He served to focus the anger and resentment of the people of Israel against their leaders and by receiving John's new Baptism, it symbolized their acknowledgment of and repentance from their sins. The people therefore signaled that they were ready for a new way of looking at and living their lives. They were, in short, ready for Jesus.

Now I am by no means comparing President-elect Biden with John the Baptizer and certainly not with Jesus. Joe Biden is a good man, but he is not our savior. I pray that he may lead us wisely and lead according to his Christian understanding, but Joe Biden, at the end of the day, is a sinful human being like you and me. Anyone who believes that he will fix what is wrong with America does not understand what is wrong with America.

That is why, friends, we still need to celebrate Christmas. Now I know that for many of us, celebrating Christmas is a season not so much of joy, but one of excess built on a base of dry and empty feelings. Many of us, honestly speaking, receive little joy from Christmas because it has been torn from its roots of welcoming Jesus into the world. At the school where I teach, the children were debating the existence of Santa Claus. One of them said, "Of course there is a Santa Claus, why else would we have Christmas?"

Why else, indeed? John the Baptizer made it clear. If you thought that he was disruptive, if you thought the he was questioning authority, then the one whose coming he proclaimed would be far, far, more intense. John told the crowds, "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."

In other words, John came to challenge the hearts and minds of the people of Israel. He came to make them think about their lives and help them realize that they were not the people they thought they were. John came to signal the people that the time had come for a change.

But what a change! Were they ready back then — indeed, are we ready now — for the life-transforming change Jesus Christ comes to make in our lives?

The Jews of John's time are not terribly different from today's Christians. Both groups may feel that just because we call ourselves the spiritual children of Abraham or followers of Jesus, we are OK with God. Hey, I believe in God. I know the Lord's Prayer. I come to church sometimes. What else do you want?

John's message was to question the authority of his day and by so doing, force the people to question themselves. And when the people questioned themselves, their lives, their beliefs, their relationship with God and each other, many realized something had to change.

My friends, as we finish this horrible year of 2020, John's question remains the same. If you are feeling unmoved, let down, and just plain empty during this Christmas season, you are not alone. Many people are simply going through the motions of Christmas without really understanding what it's truly about. Many are content to do what has always been done because they are afraid of trying anything new or different. Many, sadly, feel that the way of the world right now is the way the world is going to be tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Nothing will ever change.

But change is exactly what Jesus is all about. Jesus came to reject the authority of his day and offer the people something new, different, and exciting. His authority did not, could not come from any human being, how could it? We all know how badly we humans have messed things up. We know how greed and selfishness has made so many suffer and prevented so many of us from fulfilling all the wonderful potential God blessed us with.

Hear the good news, Jesus came into the world to give us life, real life, meaningful life, fulfilling life, and make sure that we have that life in abundance!

Our question during the Christmas season is whether you believe the message of John and, if you do, will you then believe the message of Jesus?

We both as the church and as society at large have done a wonderful job of obscuring the radical, life changing message of Jesus Christ as revealed by the Christmas Story. Now we need the traditions of Christmas. We need to hear and sing the songs. We need the power of memory to take us back to our youth or other time in our lives when all did seem right with the world. We need to be reminded about what life can be — and all that is Christmas at its best.

But we cannot sing, "Silent Night" without the message of John the Baptizer telling us we need to repent and take our lives in a new direction. We cannot sing "The First Noel," without behaving like Jesus is really our King — King of our hearts, King of our lives.

The gospels tell us John proclaimed that Jesus would baptize us with fire and the Holy Spirit. The water John offered the people was a mere outward washing. Jesus comes to transform us both outside and more importantly, inside.

But the question for those who listened to John back then is the same question for those who listen to him now: do you want to be transformed?

Let's be honest. When John says that Jesus will baptize us with fire and the Holy Spirit, what he means is that the fire of Jesus will burn away all that is sinful, all that is impure, all that keeps us from God. Baptizing us with the Holy Spirit means that once we are purified, once our old lives have been burned away, we will be filled with the Holy Spirit. We will be filled with the burning desire to do God's will and not our own. We will live not to benefit ourselves, but to build up and empower others. We will discover our own gifts, then we will use them to server all humanity. We will refocus our priorities to bring glory to God through our words and actions — how they might affect us is completely irrelevant.

Do you see what I mean by the radical change the baby of Bethlehem threatens to bring upon us? Threatens? What do I mean? How is Jesus a threat?

Jesus, friends, the real Jesus, not the doe-eyed meek and mild Jesus of greeting cards and TV specials — the real Jesus poses a threat to you and to me because when we allow him into our lives, really allow him in, he will change us. If we dare to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and as our Savior, we will be changed in ways we never thought possible. We will truly become God's new creations, so new that we may scarcely recognize ourselves.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and Savior has that power — that power to transform us utterly. That is why, friends, that is why John the Baptizer could state in all seriousness that he was unworthy to even untie the thong of his sandals. If he was not, certainly we are not.

But, we are worthy. We are worthy. We are worthy, friends, to accept the ultimate gift at Christmastime. We are worthy to accept God's gift of Jesus Christ to us, to accept him as our friend, to accept him as our chief supporter, accept him as the one who will banish all the artificiality and all the despair and all the pretense in our lives and replace it with a genuine love and a genuine desire and a genuine mission to look at our fellow human beings and devote ourselves to their well being and their fulfillment of God's plan for their lives.

How much, friends, how much do we really need at Christmastime? What do we really want? Don't we want real peace? Don't we seek real joy? Don't we crave liberation from the hypocrisy and the artificiality of this day and age? Yes! Yes we do! Accept, my friends, accept the one true and real authority in life. Accept, my friends, Jesus Christ. Accept him and live, really live.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.