

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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John the Witnesser

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know what's odd? In John's Gospel we don't find an account of Jesus being baptized by John the way we do in the other Gospels. The closest we get is in these verses we just read from John chapter 1. But if you pay attention, you will note that John the Baptist is speaking in the past tense about something he witnessed when he baptized Jesus previously: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him" (John 1: 32b). I tend to understand this difference between John's Gospel and the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as stemming from this author simply having a different set of priorities.

And so, while the synoptics lift up John as primarily being a Baptizer, I think the Gospel of John is more interested in presenting John as a witness to Jesus instead. This different emphasis certainly fits with the language being used in the verses we just read. Our appointed reading is just 13 verses long, and yet we will find the language of seeing or witnessing being used 14 times! John **sees** Jesus coming and then he talks about **seeing** the spirit descend on him and **seeing** that he is the Son of God. Then the next day he **sees** Jesus again and tells the others with him to "**Look!**" After that we find Andrew and another following after Jesus, to which Jesus asks them, "What are you **looking** for?" and then he invites them to "Come and **see.**" And that's roughly half of the seeing/witnessing language in these verses!

Clearly the idea of witnessing to Jesus is a priority for the author of this gospel. It seems to get more focus than even the event of the baptism itself! This theme will continue on in this Gospel. The word "see" will occur 75 times in the Gospel of John, more than all but three other books of the bible.¹ And it's John's Gospel that uniquely uses the word "signs" rather than "miracles" to describe Jesus' acts of power.

¹ Psalms – 110, Isaiah – 107, Jeremiah – 83, John - 75

This begs the question, what is being witnessed to? Or rather, who is being witnessed to and why? We find, even in our short reading today, some very different ideas of who Jesus is and what those around him see him as. John the Baptizer, or Witnesser as I'm going to call him in John's Gospel, witnesses to Jesus as both "Lamb of God"² (John calls Jesus this twice!) and "son of God."³ Why does John focus on the title "Lamb of God"? It's clearly an important title to the author. As a matter of fact, the Gospel of John has a completely different timeline for the crucifixion of Jesus from the other gospels because the author wants his death to fall on the day of preparation for Passover. It is intentional and significant that in John's Gospel Jesus dies on the day and at the time the sacrificial lambs were slaughtered, rather than the day after Passover (when the synoptics place his death).

So, John the Witnesser is inviting those around him to see Jesus as the lamb of God. The author of this Gospel makes a big deal out of this title. Why? Well, there is great theological weight to the firstborn Son of God (and God's only Son) dying in a manner that harkens back to Israel's rescue from slavery and death in Egypt. The tenth and final plague, the plague of the death of the firstborn sons, is ultimately completed many generations after it began. But this time the sacrifice is made willingly⁴ and it is done not to save one nation, but rather all nations.⁵ And the salvation is from slavery to sin rather than slavery to the pharaoh.

Now, you all know my discomfort with sacrificial atonement theory. The idea that Jesus died in order to fulfill God's bloodthirsty desire for sacrifice to atone for our sins. But I don't think that's what John means when he says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" in verse 29. And I come to this conclusion because of the different way in which the Gospel of John talks about sin. The author is very consistent in talking about the state of sin as opposed to individual sins or moral shortcomings. Jesus, according to John the Witnesser, takes away the state of sin from the world. Jesus takes away those barriers that we erect between us and God and between us and our neighbors. Jesus, in willingly laying down his life for the world, shows us how to live as we were created to live; out of a love that centers the other rather than the self.

² John 1:29, 36

³ John 1:34

⁴ John 15:13

⁵ John 3:16-17

John is an amazing witness, isn't he? In one title, Lamb of God, he expresses a deep theological understanding of who Jesus is and why the Word of God took on human flesh and form. And he tries to draw those around him to this understanding. Unfortunately, it takes Andrew and the other disciple a bit longer to reach John's level of understanding and witnessing!

When Jesus asks Andrew and his companion what they are looking for they prove their limited understanding. "Rabbi" they reply. They seem locked in to the mundane, the ordinary. They have followed John as their Rabbi, but after his words about Jesus they decide that Jesus must be an even better Rabbi. But they stick with what they know, don't they? Despite John's heavy title, despite calling Jesus the son of God; these two followers are locked into human perceptions and human reality, seeing Jesus as similar to John, a Rabbi, a teacher.

And yet Jesus meets them where they are. They want to know where he is staying (or more literally, "abiding"), presumably to sit and learn at his feet. So he invites them to "come and see"⁶ (more sight/witnessing language). They abide with Jesus for the whole day and as a result of this encounter Andrew becomes a witnesser too. Although his testimony will be different yet again. John witnessed to the "lamb of God" and the "son of God." The other two first witness Jesus as Rabbi, but now Andrew calls him the Messiah (the Anointed One or Christ).⁷

Another title! What does this one mean? Messiah? Anointed One? Christ? In the Hebrew Bible we see "anointed ones" being priests set aside for special service. Other "anointed ones" in scripture include kings who were anointed for kingship over Israel. We find in this title a sense of being chosen or set apart for certain roles, roles which often included ruling or leading. Then, by the time of the Babylonian Exile, we find this language being used in conjunction with the hoped-for, promised savior prophesied about primarily in Isaiah.

Jesus has a lot of titles, doesn't he? He's almost some sort of chameleon! He is all sorts of different things to all sorts of different people. But consistently in this Gospel, and the others for that matter, the people who encounter Jesus find in him what they need at that moment. Healer, teacher, confessor, priest, brother, friend, king, example, lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Christ, savior,

⁶ John 1:39b

⁷ John 1:41b

and many more titles. And having encountered Jesus, again and again, people find themselves compelled to witness to him.

How is Jesus coming to you? What need is God working to serve in your life? And having encountered the grace upon grace of the Word of God in your life, who are you going to tell about that encounter? How will you bear witness to the grace and love of God at work in you? Through you? Will you share how Jesus has taught you? Healed you? Comforted you? Fed you? Challenged you? Saved you? What title of his will you use in your witness? Who is Christ to you and what might that say about how he's at work in your life?

Take a moment now to answer one or two of these questions for yourself. How have you encountered God recently? How has Christ come to you? And here's the more difficult part, share the story of that encounter with someone else! Witness to the love and grace of God in your life. And it's okay to start small and comfortable. Share a story of an encounter with God over your next meal with loved ones. Get comfortable with the language of witnessing. I'm not asking you to proselytize, but I am asking you to practice witnessing.

Practice seeing God at work in your life and in the world around you and practice witnessing to that work. Yes, this means working on evangelism. But we need not fear that word! That scary word shares the same Greek root as "gospel" and "gospel" simply means "good news." So another way to translate "evangelism" might be, "gospeling." Which means another way to think of evangelism is "good-news-ing" or to be better grammatically, "sharing good news." Practice sharing the good news you've experienced from God! That's it, that's all witnessing means. That's all evangelism means: sharing what God has been up to in your life. Witnessing to how God has met you where you are. John did it. Then Andrew and many others after him. Now it's our turn. Amen.