

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 6, 2020**

WITNESS TO THE WORD

John 1:6-9

Last Sunday we began our Advent exploration of the Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18), where John, the “beloved disciple” and close friend of Jesus, introduces us to Jesus as the eternal Word (or expression) of God who, in God’s perfect timing, took on our flesh and blood and came to live among us in order to die for us on the cross. His death – and the salvation and forgiveness it procured for us – was the reason for His birth. It was the purpose of His coming.

Today, as we continue our examination of these opening verses in the Gospel of John, we turn the spotlight on another man named John. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word from John 1:6-9.

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This John is usually referred to as John the Baptist or John the Baptizer, in order to distinguish him from the apostle John, who is one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus and the author of this Gospel as well as the three New Testament letters of John and the Book of Revelation. It is John the Baptizer to whom John the apostle introduces us in the verses we just read. This John – the Baptizer – was the late-in-life, only son of a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, who, it turns out, was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. You can read about the birth of John and the events leading up to it in Luke 1.

John is one of the most fascinating figures in the whole Bible. His appearance was unusual. He may have looked like a wild man with his long hair and shaggy beard. His wardrobe was strange – he wore clothing made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist (Mark 1:6). His diet was strange, too – he ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). He drank no wine or other adult beverages (Luke 1:15). He lived out in the wilderness by himself. “strange” is no doubt a word we would apply to him. But from birth the hand of God was upon him. From before his birth, he was set apart by God for the Lord’s service. From his birth, if not before, God’s Spirit was upon him, preparing him for the work God had prepared for him to do. And John was passionate, even fearless, as he carried out his mission from God, even when it got him in trouble. He was arrested and eventually beheaded by Herod Antipas, the governor of Judea, at the urging of Salome, the daughter of Herod’s wife Herodias. You can read about that in Mark 6.

While there are many things we can learn from the life and witness of John the Baptizer, there are three things I want to bring to your attention today.

1. KNOW WHO YOU ARE

The first thing we can learn from John is the importance of knowing yourself. To make the most of your life, you've got to know who you are. One thing that impresses me about John is that he knew who he was – and who he was not.

When the religious leaders in Jerusalem heard about John and what he was doing, how he was preaching a message of repentance and baptizing people in the Jordan River, they sent a delegation from Jerusalem to check him out. They wanted to see him in action. They wanted to know who he was, or who he *thought* he was. And they didn't waste time with pleasantries. They got right to the point. They said: "Who are you? Are you the Messiah? Are you the Christ? Are you the One we've been waiting for?"

Stop and think about that for a moment. Wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't it be incredibly flattering? With crowds of people coming from all over to listen to you, with the big kahunas taking notice of you, it wouldn't be difficult to start believing some grandiose things about yourself, would it?

But John did not let it go to his head. John knew who he was, and who he was not. Without hesitation he said: "I am not the Christ" (John 1:19-20).

"Then who are you?" they wanted to know. "Are you Elijah (whose coming was foretold by the prophet Malachi [Malachi 4:5-6])? Are you the prophet (whose coming Moses spoke about [Deuteronomy 18:15])?"

"No, I am not." It is true that on one occasion Jesus said: "If you are willing to accept it, (John) is the Elijah who was to come" (Matthew 11:14). But John did not view himself as the second coming of Elijah.

"Then who are you?" The religious leaders pressed him for an answer. "What do you say about yourself?" (John 1:21-22)

John answered in terms of the prophetic word of Isaiah 40:3: "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" In other words, John said: "I'm just an ordinary man doing what God called me to do. I'm a voice crying in the wilderness: 'Get ready to meet the Lord, because He is coming!' I'm here to prepare the way for Him. If you think there is something special about me, you haven't seen anything yet! The One coming after me – the real Messiah – is so great that I'm not even worthy to be His slave" (John 1:23-27).

John knew who he was, and who he was not. He found his identity not in what other people said about him or in his popularity with the crowds who flocked to him. He found his identity in his relationship with God. He knew who he was because he knew the God who had made him and called him.

John's identity was rooted in a relationship, in his relationship with God. It was built on the foundation of a personal relationship with the God of the universe, the God who knows you and me by name and has a mission for each one of us.

John knew who he was. How about you? Do you know who you are? Have you discovered your true identity in a personal relationship with God, with the God who made you and loves you and has a good and gracious plan for your life?

Unless or until you do, you will miss out on the best things in life, and you will not fulfill the purpose for which God made you.

Which leads to the second thing we can learn from John's life.

2. KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

The second thing we can learn from John's life is the importance of knowing your purpose. John knew that he had been sent from God, that he was a man on a mission. He was not the Messiah. He was not the eternal Word of God who became incarnate – flesh and blood – in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4) and came to live among us in order to die for us. John was not the one and only Son of God and Savior of sinners. He was not the light of the world that the darkness cannot extinguish. That was not John. It was Jesus.

John came not as the light but as a witness to the light. Not as the Word but as a witness to the Word. Not to call attention to himself but to draw attention to Jesus. Not to make a name for himself but to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior.

The purpose of John's life – a purpose he embraced gladly – was to point beyond himself to the Messiah – to the Savior – so that people would recognize *Jesus*, believe in *Jesus*, and follow *Jesus*. John's mission from God as the forerunner of the Messiah was to prepare the way for the coming of *Jesus* and then to point others to *Him* – which is exactly what John did.

The main message of John's life, which took precedence even over his insistent call to repentance, was what he said to his own followers (including Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter) when he saw Jesus in John 1:29 and again in 1:36. He said: "Look [Behold], the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior who would give His own life as a sacrifice to pay for your sin and my sin and the sin of everyone who believes in Him.

John gave this testimony about Jesus: "I have seen and I testify that this (He – *Jesus*) is the Son of God" (John 1:34).

To point people to Jesus so that they would believe in Him and love Him and follow Him was the purpose of John's life. It was what he was made for.

So, when larger and larger numbers of people began to follow Jesus, how did John react? Did he get mad? Was he jealous? Did he feel hurt? No. It made him happy. It gave him great joy. He didn't mind at all. In fact, it was just what he wanted.

One of the most amazing statements in the whole Bible is found in John 3:30. What makes it so amazing, so powerful, is how counter it runs to human nature. John the Baptist is speaking. He says: "He [*Jesus*] must become greater; I must become less" (NIV). "He [*Jesus*] must increase" in stature and fame, in the affections and devotion of people's hearts, "but I must decrease" (ESV).

That is a radically life-altering perspective. It is a way a seeing, a way of thinking, a way of living that will turn a person's life right-side up! So many people live by the false maxim that says: "*I must increase. I must become greater and greater.*"

The life of John the Baptist points to a different way. A better way. The way that says: *Jesus* must become greater, and I must become less. My life must become less about me and more about Him.

John understood what you and I must understand if we are going to serve God's purposes with our lives. Make no mistake: God has a purpose for your life, as surely as He had a purpose for John's life. John understood that it wasn't about him. It wasn't about his place or prestige or popularity. It was all about Jesus. It was all about the Word – the Word of God who became flesh and lived among us and came to die for us. It wasn't about John. He was just a witness to the Word.

My life is not about me. Your life is not about you. It is all about Jesus. Do you see that? Like John, our purpose is to point people to Jesus. Like John, we are people with a purpose.

Do you know your purpose? Do you know *God's* purpose for your life? Have you embraced it?

Does it animate and energize you the way it did John?

Are you serving God's purposes in your life?

Like John, we are not the light. Jesus is the light. Like John's, our job is to bear witness to the light. To reflect the light of Jesus. To point people to the true light – *Jesus* – who gives light to everyone (1:9).

3. A SPIRIT OF HUMILITY

The third lesson we can learn from John is the importance of a spirit of humility.

John could be bold. He was direct and uncompromising in his message. He didn't hesitate to call a snake a snake, or to call sin exactly what it was. But he had a spirit of humility, because he had a clear sense of who he was and who he was not. He had a clear sense of God's claim

on his life and God's purpose for his life. He knew what some Christians – especially Christian leaders – sometimes forget: You cannot glorify God and glorify yourself at the same time. You cannot exalt Jesus and exalt yourself at the same time.

John Ortberg tells a story in one of his books (*Love Beyond Reason*) about the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station to get gas. (This either took place a lot of years ago, or it must have been in New Jersey, because that's the only place I know of where they still have attendants who pump gas for customers.) Anyway, the CEO went inside to pay (another indicator that this took place back in the last millennium), and when he came out he noticed his wife engaged in a deep conversation with the service station attendant. It turns out that she knew him. In fact, they had dated in high school before she met her eventual husband.

The CEO got back in the car, and they drove off. After a period of silence, the CEO said: "I bet I know what you were thinking. I bet you were thinking how glad you are that you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant."

Know what she said? She said: "No, I was thinking that if I had married him, he'd be a Fortune 500 CEO and you'd be a service station attendant."

In Isaiah 66:3, the Lord says:

"This is the one I esteem:
The one who is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word."

Both James and Peter remind us that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 3:34).

As someone has said: "It takes more grace than I can tell to play the second fiddle well."

John the Baptist played second fiddle exceptionally well. He demonstrated the amazing grace of humility, and God honored him for it.

He was content not to be the light, but a witness to the light. He was content not to be the Word to whom all worship and praise belong, but a witness to the Word.

May it be so with us. May we go and do likewise, this Advent season and always, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.