

A Faithful Testimony

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[0:00] Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Well, I invite you to turn your Bibles to page 1053, as will be in the Gospel of John this morning.

! We'll be in John chapter 1, and we're looking at verse 19 to 28, and looking at the testimony of John the Baptist. A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

If you remember last week, we said John the Baptist and Apostle Paul were examples of faithful heralds. What is a herald? Someone who is given a message from the king to deliver.

And these two men were examples of faithful heralds. A faithful herald's chief mission was to faithfully point to Jesus Christ, and to prepare people to meet him.

To be entrusted, to deliver a message from the king to the enemy, who is in open rebellion against you. That very fact, to do that is another thing entirely.

[1:20] That's what John the Baptist is called to do. That's what Apostle Paul was called to do. To be a faithful herald, to deliver a message from the king to a people in open rebellion.

In the Roman times, there were customs and how you treated an emissary coming to parley. You listened to that emissary.

You let them return with an answer. There is a sure sign that you were dealing with an uncivilized foe or enemy if when you sent a herald to them, they showed their barbarity by killing your emissary and returning his head to you as an act of defiance and declaration of war.

And oftentimes when that happens, Rome makes a point to make an example of such people.

When they defeat such an enemy, they annihilate root and stem as if that nation or that city has never existed.

Well, in this analogy that we have, the barbarous enemy is Israel itself. Israel had killed the prophet.

[2:40] They killed prophets after prophet that was sent by God. Jesus himself will indict them of this. And now, God's most important emissary has come to them.

John the Baptist. Well, as you say, the second most important emissary. John the Baptist has come. He came with a message that the Lord himself has come. Your Messiah has come.

We read of this prophecy of Isaiah about the forerunner of the Messiah in the first lesson in Isaiah 40 this morning. The message is that the Lord has come.

And as this message goes out, as John the Baptist preached, as his influence grew, the temple authorities, the Sanhedrin, they heard of him and they sent delegates.

They sent an official delegation from Jerusalem to question John the Baptist. That's what we read now in our gospel account that John gives us. This is this engagement with this official delegation from the ruling authorities in Jerusalem come to John the Baptist to seek out who he is.

[3:55] They wanted to see if he's just another zealot, another false messiah. There had been, and there are at that time, many false messiahs who had risen in those days only to be put down by Herod or by the Roman authorities.

And they were wary because oftentimes that false messiahs lead to insurrection and trouble and violence and turmoil. And they wanted to know who this person is.

If it's another troublemaker. But they were also curious probably because they were looking for the true messiah. And so they were curious. Who is this person? This John the Baptist.

This strange man in the desert with strange attires and a strange diet preaching repentance. So this interaction is not a benign interaction at all.

It's not an armless interaction. It is fraught with political significance and danger. They came with a vested interest in determining if John the Baptist was genuine.

[5:11] As all of Israel was waiting for the dawn of an eye to break upon the nation. They were waiting for the light from God to shine into their darkness. And they wanted to know if this John the

Baptist is the avenger or even the one who will point them to that true light.

So they come to John and they ask him Who are you? And we read in verse 20 John tells us John the Apostle tells us that John the Baptist says of himself He confessed and did not deny but confessed I am not the Christ.

Do you see that? Even in his confession even in John the Baptist's confession he has an unwaveringly point of view and desire to point to Jesus Christ and not to himself.

He confessed and did not deny but confessed. It means that he was adamant and forceful in a statement that I am not the Christ.

Because that's what of course they were thinking. Is this the Messiah? You must remember that for hundreds of years over 400 years now there have been no prophet in Israel.

[6 : 27] They have not heard the voice of God. So these people are starving to hear. But here John the Baptist says I am not the Christ.

This Elijah that has come again of whom Jesus said he is the greatest man amongst those born of women. That's how Jesus described John the Baptist. This man will later tell them and he will later tell his disciples he must increase and I must decrease.

That's John the Baptist's mission plan. Ministry formula. He must increase and I must decrease.

Well they ask him if you're not the Christ are you Elijah? They ask because they know their scriptures. They knew they remembered Malachi's prophecy that says behold I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

And so they're wondering okay if you're not the Christ are you Elijah? The one who is to come. But John said no. However Jesus himself identified John in Matthew 11 verse 14 as the Elijah who is to come.

[7 : 46] But John never said that of himself. His singular aim both in this interaction and in his preaching of repentance is always to point to Jesus.

To make people ready for the coming king. So in his preaching he made much of the Messiah and made little of himself.

He also made little of the powerful emissaries that have come to interact with him. He could have cozied up to them. It would have been in his interest.

These are powerful people. Powerful emissaries. Powerful messengers. It never hurts to have powerful friends after all. At least it's better than having powerful enemies.

John could have cozied up to them. But John is an emissary of the king. He didn't come to make a treaty. He didn't come to parlay as is typically done by two opposing sides where both sides make concessions in order to come to an agreement and a cessation of hostilities.

[9 : 01] That's not who John is. He's in herald. He is the voice that cries prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

That's who John the Baptist is. He is the voice that threatens that every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low. The unheaven ground shall become level and rough places are plain.

The Lord is here. That is who John the Baptist is. He's not come to make treaty. He's come to declare surrender.

So imagine the temptation to look out for himself that John might have had in this point. Again, this interaction is not just a benign sort of oh, who are you, who are you?

These people are powerful. They've come to suss them out. These are deadly people. And imagine the temptation John the Baptist might have had to look out for himself as he interacts with them, to soften the message of repentance that he's been preaching, to soften it to this important delegation that is before him.

[10 : 21] But he doesn't do that. What does he do? Instead he called them a brood of vipers. He accused them of being deceitful, that's what it means to be a brood of vipers, deceitful, dangerous, and wicked.

Deceitful, dangerous, and wicked. all traits of their father, the devil. That's what John says about them. And I'm sure at this point some ministry expert might look at John the Baptist and lament his missed opportunity.

The ministry practices of our day are tragically not unlike trying to trap a mouse. This is what happens when you try to trap a mouse. You leave little treats along the way, little morsels of winsomeness.

You offer a few shibboleths to the cultural establishment to show them that you're not a threat to them. You make a few concessions here and there.

A few concessions here, a few concessions there. And before you know it, you've conceded the gospel message altogether. And all you're winning people to is a mausoleum, a place devoid of the power of the spirit of truth that leads people to Jesus as the only savior of mankind.

[11:52] Instead, you've just exchanged one dead-end false religion for another. It might have the trappings of the church, but it's devoid of its power, it's devoid of its truth, it's devoid of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and a call to repentance.

You've only just laid crumbs to the mousetrap. And what does crumbs to a mousetrap lead to? Death. A ministry at a consultant might have told John the Baptist, well, make friends with these people.

Leave them crumbs. But that's not who John the Baptist is. Ironically, this is what Israel's religious leaders had become. They've become blind people leading blind people.

The religious leaders of Israel who come to John the Baptist, they themselves were workers of iniquity. They were brood of vipers, as John called them. In fact, interesting enough, John called them the same thing, brood of vipers, and Jesus, his cousin, also called them the same thing.

[13:06] Both called the religious leaders brood of vipers. They were meant to be heralds, pointing people to God, but they had long abandoned the truth about God.

Isaiah said of them, because these people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me. And their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

It means they have no fear of God anymore. They fear man rather than God. Ezekiel wrote concerning these people, they come to you as people come.

They sit before you as my people and they hear what you say but they will not do it. For with lustful talk in their mouths they act.

Their heart is set on their game. Their heart is set on their own selfish game. The Lord himself affirmed the words of his prophets when he said of them, you hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you.

[14:13] These is the religious establishment in Israel. This was the state of worship in Israel. But I'm afraid that there's far too much similarity and familiarity in our day with such religious leaders.

We see them all around us. False heralds of the gospel abound. They make much of themselves and they make little of the Lord. Their heart is set on their own gain.

These are the ones that Paul warns the church of Philippians to be wary of when he says in Philippians theory that they are enemies of the cross of Christ. And he told us that there are many signs that mock such people out.

Their God is their stomach Paul tells us. Their glory is in their shame Paul tells us. And they are focused on earthly things. these signs are also their judgment.

Because scripture said of such false gospel witnesses, their end is destruction. So brothers and sisters, we must know the signs.

[15:28] We must know the signs and we must not follow such leaders. For they will lead many to destruction. even more so, we must not countenance such people in the house of God.

We must watch over ourselves that we do not become like them. Bruised of vipers. We must watch over our own hearts.

Examine what we do and why we do it. So we have these religious leaders who come. We have John the Baptist. And John the Baptist stands in contrast to these religious leaders.

He was given, John the Baptist, in this interaction, he was given plenty of opportunity to talk about himself. They wanted to know. He was given plenty of to sell himself, which is what they wanted him to do.

Instead, he said he rejected every attempt to exalt himself. And he told them instead what they needed to know, not what they wanted to know.

[16:48] He told them of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He pointed at every turn in this interaction to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He said to them, if you need to know who I am, as far as you're concerned, I am just the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. John said of himself, I'm a voice. That's all I am. A herald.

All I am is a herald of a singular message. And the message is this, the advent of your king and lord is near.

Prepare to meet him. Repent. Turn to him. I am a mere voice proclaiming Christ. I am a nobody. But then the parents, the contingent among the delegation asked him, then if you're not the Christ, if you're not Elijah, if you're not the prophet that Moses speaks of, the prophet to come, then why are you baptizing?

[18:01] If you're neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet, you're none of these people, why are you baptizing? And again, John is less interested, even in answering that question, he's less interested in defending himself, he's less interested in defending his ministry method, as he is more interested in pointing to Jesus.

And so what is his response? He says, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie.

God. In other words, whatever you think of me, John seems to be saying, whatever you think of me, my worth in comparison to the one who comes after me, who was before me, is as a slave to his master.

That's what happens. It's only someone as low as a slave that is given the task of untying the sandals of his master.

And here John says, I'm not even worthy of that task of a slave. Do you want to know who I am?

John seems to be saying to them. He's saying, I am a faithful bond servant, a slave.

[19:26] brothers and sisters, John the Baptist's world is not unlike ours. John the Baptist's world is a place full of paranoid and despotic rulers, leaders, religious and secular.

We saw that in the Gospel of the Nativity story. We were looking at that during the adult Sunday school hour of Herod coming to Bethlehem, seeking out the king who has been born, and killing in his paranoia, killing the innocents.

His world is fraught with political tension and traps and death on all sides. Our world is not very much unlike that.

Leaders who have no fear of God before their eyes. John the Baptist lived in a world in which many know this is not the way things ought to be.

People knew that during this is why they flocked after John to hear what he has to say. People know this is not the way things ought to be. And they know we need someone to come.

[20:44] We need someone to come and rescue us from the mess we've made. We still live in such world. Where many people are clamoring for salvation. For a savior. But here's the tragedy.

Despite the great need there is a greater rot that has set in. We know we need a savior. But we are poisoned fruit from a poisoned tree.

All of humanity. And not only can we not save ourselves. Left to our own. We are blind to the one who has come to rescue us.

Here's the great problem. This is why the gospel is essential, is imperative, and we must continually, like John the Baptist, declare it.

It is the only thing, the only medicine that can break through the rot and bring dead people to life.

Jesus Christ and the gospel about his life, death, and resurrection.

[21:57] And we must admit that even we will receive grace upon grace through the abundant mercy of our God. We will be forgiven and birthed anew into a new family. Even we ourselves cannot endure a day, an hour, not even a minute without his grace poured out on us.

All who are recipients of the good news are charged to be heralds of it as well. Have you received the good news? Do you believe it? Have you trusted in it?

Have you entrusted your whole life, body and soul, to it? Then you've been called to be heralds of that same good news. You must proclaim it. But we know the news we proclaim.

Do you know the news you proclaim? Do you know what the good news means to a world that has declared war against God? Do you know that as you declare the good news you're declaring to the enemies of God?

You're declaring to them, surrender or be vanquished. That's the good news. It is the good news of God's mercy, of God's desire to save and bring those who were lost to himself.

[23:15] But it's also a news of God's victory over sin and death and all who oppose him. It is a declaration to the world that is rebelling against God, surrender or be vanquished.

It is not a compromising message, this good news. It is a call to total surrender on God's terms alone. He who has conquered sin and death, calls all who will come to him to bend the knee and receive life.

But, because it's good news and a call to surrender, a world that is in rebellion against God will not want to hear that news. This sinful world is no less barbarous than the world the apostles and the prophets lived in.

And so we must expect, as we declare that good news, to face opposition. The sinful world hates this good news of God's mercy. It hates the grace and free offer of salvation that it gives to all who turn to Jesus by faith.

And it is with this awareness of the opposition that we face that St. Paul tells us in Philippians 4. He knows the opposition. He's lived out that opposition in his ministry, Paul has, and then he says in Philippians 4, Rejoice in the Lord always.

[24 : 42] Again, I would say rejoice. Paul is writing from prison. But he writes, Rejoice. Again, I say rejoice in the Lord.

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Here is the apostles' message of joy, of steadfast groundedness.

That's what he means by reasonableness here. Be grounded. Be steadfast. Be assured of the promises of your God, even in the midst of all that's going on.

And why? Why rejoice? Why be grounded and reasonable? Why not be anxious about anything? Anything, he says. Do not be anxious about anything.

[25 : 37] Here's a man writing from prison. His life is in the hands of those who are enemies of Christ. And he says, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be known to God.

Why? It's in the middle of that very first, because the Lord is at hand. Because the Lord is at hand, rejoice.

be not anxious. Listen, brothers and sisters, to the Apostle Paul. Listen to the abiding promise of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, dear Christian.

Listen, all of you will travel in this wilderness of this world, awaiting the promised country that is your eternal home. Listen to this word of promise.

Rejoice. the Lord is at hand. And Paul continues, he says, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

[26 : 47] The word surpasses means exceeds. The peace of God exceeds all understanding, transcends all understanding, outshines all understanding, outdoes all understanding.

The peace of God surpasses all understanding, all understanding in any circumstances you may face. Whether prison, as Paul was, whether ridicule, a place of work because you believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and you believe God's law and God's rule for life, whether ridicule because you refuse to compromise on the truth about who God is, about who you are as a created being in his world, whether alienation from family and friends because of your faith, whatever it may be, whatever the circumstances is, the peace of God surpasses it all.

And so, brothers and sisters, we are heralds of this good news. But we proclaim it amidst warfare all around us.

We're in enemy territory. This Advent season, as it comes to an end, and as we await the celebration of the nativity of our Lord, remember, he has come.

He has come and he has vanquished sin and death. We live on the other side of his first Advent. We are recipients of that good news. Christ has come.

[28 : 21] Christ has conquered. But Christ will come again. We also know that to be true. And as we await his coming again, let us be faithful arrows like John the Baptist, like Apostle Paul.

Let us bear faithful witness this coming year to the goodness of Jesus Christ. No matter the cost, no matter the opposition, knowing that the victory is at hand, the Lord is at hand.

let us pray. Stir up your power, O Lord. And we pray that with great might come among us as we are sorely ended by our sins from running the race that is set before us.

Let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever.

Amen. Amen.