

FOCUS: The Good News is we are called to be witnesses of Christ, not to hide in the Witness Protection Program.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who are *not* big fans of John the Baptist, I have some very bad news. This isn't the last time this lectionary cycle that you will hear me preach about the ministry of the Baptizer. No, indeed he appears at least one more time this cycle, so sit back, relax and hear the Good News that John the Evangelist shares to us about the ministry of the Baptizer and of the Messiah, Jesus.

John the Baptizer comes as a witness—in Greek, the word is *martyreo*, from which we get the English word *martyr*. He is a witness to the One who was to come, the promised Messiah. John was sent from God by the power of the Holy Spirit to do this witnessing. Remember verse 6 from our Gospel this morning, because we will come back to it again later.

John is preaching and baptizing people as fast as they can come to him in the desert. He is baptizing not only the wanderers and nomads of the desert, but those who have come out of the city of Jerusalem to find out what this “crazy” man in the desert is doing, and what makes his preaching so enticing and electrifying that everyone wants to hear and see him. John's message—his witness or testimony—was to the light that was to come. That is, John was preaching to the people about the Light of the world—with a capital “L”—Jesus. John was attracting so much attention that the priests and Pharisees in the temple wanted more information. Was this just another nut case, or was this John character a threat to them and to the peace and stability of the Hebrew people or—could it *really* be a messenger from God?

So the interrogators came out to see John, and the questioning began. “Who are you?” they demanded to know. Now, how often is that question asked? And, how often is the response simply “I am *insert your name here*.” But this time, John responds as if he *knows* the question that is really on their minds. How many of us would respond as John did to this simple question, by

saying who we are *not*? Here are the Pharisees, expecting to get some useful information, probably even enough to arrest John and get him out of the public view, and John goes and gives them the answer they *least* expected. Upon interrogation, John witnesses that he is *not* the Messiah. And in his testimony, John gives even more information. By declaring who he is not, John also declares that there is someone who *is* the Messiah, the Anointed One.

The Pharisees, not to be left completely in the dark, quickly pick up on the point that John is making. Being good scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Pharisees know that Micah prophesizes that Elijah will come back before the Messiah comes. So, in order to quickly eliminate *that* from the picture, they ask, “Are you Elijah?” John, as we heard, testifies that he is not. Finally, exasperated that they haven’t come any closer to an answer than they had before trekking out to the banks of the Jordan, they plead with John for an answer they can take back to those higher up who sent them out to talk to John. And John tells them, “I’m not the prophet you are seeking as a sign, but I am simply one who calls out into the wilderness for you and everyone else to prepare for the coming of the Lord. That is what Isaiah said would happen before the day of the Lord, and that’s why I’m here.”

Now the questioners were *really* confused. If this guy in camel hair clothes *isn’t* a prophet and *isn’t* Elijah and *isn’t* the Messiah, and all that he has been sent to do is proclaim “Prepare the way of the Lord,” then what in the *world* is he doing. With all of this information overload, the interrogators then ask the obvious—at least to them—question of John.

“If you aren’t any of these people, then why in the *world* are you baptizing everyone who comes to see you?”

John then explains to them what he has been telling everyone else. “I’m baptizing with water, a ritual cleansing, as a sign of repentance for sin. However, there is One who is to come, who is right in your midst, in fact, whom *you* don’t know, but is so powerful and so well-connected that I am not even worthy of the dirty job of untying his dirty, smelly, sandals.”

And so we have John the Baptist's witness, his testimony, when questioned about what he was doing preaching, teaching, and baptizing in the wilderness. John has been sent by God to give testimony to the Messiah. John comes to bring light into a dark world, a world that seems to be in despair, under occupation by foreign powers, a world that seems to have forgotten that God not only *was*, but *is* and *will be*, too. In the midst of all the darkness that surrounds the people, John comes to testify to the truth about God's plan for salvation of all people. John was *sent* by God to be a witness, to give testimony to the salvation that would come to all people through Jesus Christ. In the Greek, the word "sent" is translated *apostello* or *pempo*. Because he was sent by God to give witness to Jesus, we can rightly say that John the Baptist is a part of the salvation story. If we accept this, then we—yes, you and I—can rightly be called a part of the plan of salvation, too.

If you recall, Jesus greets the apostles (and through his command to them, us as well), with the words, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." This suggests to us that we are no longer "ordinary" folks standing on the outside looking in, but are truly a part of God's greater plan. Because we have been sent as Jesus was sent, we carry with us not just an important place as one of the children of God, but as a vital piece in God's plan of salvation. Like John the Baptist, we, too, have been sent by God to be witnesses—to give our testimony—about the One who is to come, the One who will return at the Last Day to reign over heaven and earth, the One whom we soon will celebrate his birth so that we might later mourn his crucifixion and celebrate his glorious resurrection.

So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not only called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, as we noted in last week's Gospel, but we have the greater command and responsibility to be witnesses to the salvation offered to all people through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is a responsibility we should not take lightly. It is also a calling we should accept joyfully.

Go and proclaim the Good News. Tell all whom you meet and greet that you come as a witness to the One who is to come. We are called to be

witnesses of the Gospel to all nations, not to hide in the Witness Protection Program. Thanks be to God!