Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

**Introduction**

Not in Irving Berlin’s sad and wistful way when he wrote the original usually skipped verse of White Christmas: The sun is shining, the grass is green, The orange and palm trees sway. There's never been such a day, in Beverly Hills, L.A. But I’m feeling those verses in more of an internal clock being off. Yes, the tree is up. And yes, I even put up some lights outside the house. Packages have been arriving on the doorstep that can’t be opened. The signs are all present of something coming, but it just doesn’t feel like it. The sun is shining and the palm trees sway.

And that internal clock is smashing together with this year’s crazy calendar of Christmas Eve being on a Sunday. It is only Advent 3, the 2nd Sunday of John the Baptist. The calendar is yelling at me to quickly skip by him. Everybody not living by a church calendar is already nestling down for a long winters nap. But the sun is shining and the palm trees sway. There has never been such a day so close to Christmas.

Sigh. So I am sorry if I am not quite Christmas-y enough yet.

But I do think that the Evangelist John’s picture of John the Baptist has something for us today. In the background in my mind is the episode this week of a man taking down a statue of Satan put up in the Iowa legislature hall. I’ll get back to that, but I want it in your head as well.

**Text**

The synoptic gospel accounts of John the Baptist are the ones that I think we carry in our heads. John the Wildman, wearing camel’s hair and leather, eating honey and bugs. And most Hollywood depictions of John are very willing to play that up. The most recent season 1 of The Chosen especially does that with what is best described as Homeless Man John in prison talking with Nicodemus. But the gospel writer John’s picture lays aside those prophetic tropes, and I think probably gets closer.

What is the Baptist? According the John he is a witness. “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.” Simple. So simple that we might ask how are we ourselves any different. We are all His witnesses.

But John is doing strange things. The priests and Levites from Jerusalem simply reducing it all to one question, “Then why are you baptizing?” But that baptizing stands in for a lot of things. The prophetic clothes, the location – the Jordan – which evokes a new crossing of the Jordan and a new people, the proclamations to repent, the provocations of the powerful – “you brood of vipers, who warned you” to picking a fight with Herod himself over his wife. They reduce it all to this one act – baptizing.

And John the Baptist can’t be the crazy man that he is so often portrayed as because the priests and Levites from Jerusalem – respectable men all – engage with him in a question and answer session. They have to identify this guy. They have to categorize him and examine the question that Jesus will ultimately challenge them with: “From where does John’s authority come?” So they ask him, “Who are you?” The assumption is that he is not just a witness, but that he will claim one of the offices or roles Israel’s history promises. And the most common category would be “the Christ” the messiah.

John immediately says “I’m not the Christ.” Which confuses them “What then? Elijah?” Elijah had been taken up into heaven on that fire-y chariot and the popular imagination held that Elijah would come back before the messiah. That is eventually how Jesus will say “if you can hear it, John is the Elijah to come.” But here and now, the Baptist says “I am not Elijah.” So the priests pull out their last possible category – “The Prophet.” Moses had promised “a prophet like me.” If you are not the Christ himself, or the forerunner whose authority would rest on the Christ, are you like Moses? John, from where does your authority to do these things come from?

John refuses all their categories and it flummoxes them. “Who are you? We need to give an answer? What do you say about yourself?”

And what John says is that he is simply a witness. And the witness has one job. “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” That is the witness. This sinful world is simply the wilderness. Full of powers and dominions and thrones. Demons and delights. All going nowhere. But there is voice crying out to all those in the wilderness. And what does it say, “Make straight the way of the LORD.”

**Christology**

God himself in coming. His way goes through the wilderness. The way of the LORD goes through every single heart in all of his creation. And this one who comes after this poor witness is more than you can imagine. Right now, you don’t know him. Now most of you here today do know him. Someone has been His witness to you. Someone made his path as straight as they could. You have met the LORD in word and sacrament. You have heard the testimony and seen the light. And Christ has baptized you not with water but with his Spirit.

But maybe some of you are like these priests – you don’t know him. You are in a room of a great cloud of witnesses. None of us are the Christ, or the Elijah or The Prophet. We are simply a voice in the desert. Here, at the foot of the cross, you will find water for your souls. Here, in the person of Jesus, you find your way out of the wilderness. The Spirit of the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. Whatever in this world has beaten you and left you half dead on the side of the road, in Christ you receive back double. Because now is the year of the LORD’s favor.

**Moral**

Now the question that has been hanging over me is that one of Satan. Since the literal idols disappeared – or were made to disappear - a long time ago, our great foe has seemed to be content being unseen. There is that old joke about the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was making us think he doesn’t exist. But in our times he seems pretty intent on being seen.

And when you call it out, or remove it, or baptize for repentance or make some paths straight. Today, you are met with exactly the questions that the priests hit John the Baptist with? “Who are you?” Where do you think your authority to say and do these things comes from? It doesn’t matter than only 10 mins ago, almost everyone would have recognized your action or thought as common sense. Today, the authority of common sense is challenged.

And our answer is really as simple as John’s. I am a witness to the light, a voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the LORD. Because that is simply the call of a disciple. To confess. To confess that we are not the Christ, we are not some esoteric prophet, we are not the return of the law giver. We are merely a witness to the one who is. Whose sandals we are not worthy to untie.

In some ages the world hears that witness. In others it crucifies it. In that latter age courage among those in positions of leadership often fails. The responsibility to witness, to make straight the paths remains. It falls to those maybe like Amos. “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. (Amos 7:14 ESV)” Or maybe it falls to the stones crying out. But the LORD is never without his witnesses.

The Baptist to the gospel writer John is not so much the eschatological Elijah, as merely our pattern. Who are you? I am a witness about the light.

**Eschatological**

I wish I had put it in this week. I put it in next week’s service – the Christmas Hymn A Great and Mighty Wonder. A great and mighty wonder/a full and holy cure/the virgin bears the infant/with virgin honor pure. Advent 4 is usually Mary’s week, so that is why it is there. But its final stanza has been haunting my meditation this week. It is originally in Greek from St. Germanus who lived in late 600 to early 700’s AD. It finds its way into German and from that into English. And the 5th verse , which the old Lutheran Hymnal preserves closer to the greek, it is St. Germanus celebrating the destruction of the idols which he had seen in his lifetime. St. Boniface chops down the sacred oak of Thor in 723 AD. All Idol forms shall perish/ and error shall decay/ as Christ shall wield his scepter. The continuing Great and Mighty Wonder is that from the Advent of Mary’s child, the reign of Christ grows. The idols once strong have been chopped down.

Our current hymnal alters that 5th verse. Taking it out of the immediate just seen and placing it in the future. All idols then shall perish/and Satan’s lying cease/And Christ shall raise his scepter/decreeing endless peace.

This time between the Advents is a bit like the juxtaposition of those two versions. Sometimes the idols are taken down and the Great and Mighty Wonder is made real right now. Sometimes everyone has gone their own way, maybe doing something as stupid as erecting idols. But Christ remains the King. And we remain witnesses to the light. The day comes when all idols – stupid ones of stone and wood and trickier ones of the heart – shall perish. And Satan’s lying cease. Whether that lying comes through those in nice clothes and seats of power, or it comes from our own desires.

The day comes when witnesses shall no longer be needed. Because all will see the glory of the LORD. And endless peace declared. But today, in between the Advents, whether idols are coming down or being erected, we remain witness. Witnesses concerning the light. Amen.