

Advent 3 / December 17, 2023

John 1:6-7

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the Light, that all might believe through him.”

John the Baptist preceded Jesus both in birth and in ministry. His mother Mary visited John’s mother while both were with child. Luke tells us John acknowledged Jesus’ presence by leaping in his mothers’ womb. John prepared Israel for Jesus’ ministry by calling them to repentance. John inaugurated Jesus’ ministry by baptizing Him in the Jordan river. The Holy Spirit anointed Him and the Father declared Him His beloved Son. John was born before Jesus and also died before the Lord. When Jesus was told of John’s death, He praised him saying, *“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”*

Jesus’ acknowledged John’s greatness, not because of their common family background, his popularity, his piety, his personal integrity or because of his devotion to the Lord. John’s greatness was that He was the culmination of the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament, which pointed to the coming of the Christ. The prophets before John anticipated the coming of Christ. They saw His coming through faith by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. John saw the Christ with his eyes, touched Him with his hands and pointed to Him in the flesh, saying, *“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* The prophets bore witness to the coming of the Light. John testified to the Light in the person of Jesus Christ, that all might believe and have life through Him.

When Jesus heard of John’s death He praised him, but then significantly He added, *“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”* How could John be so great on the one hand, that among those born of women none was greater, and so much less on the other hand, that the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he? John was great in terms of the prophetic task of making Jesus known as the Messiah, God with us in human flesh. The prophetic ministry leads to Jesus. The author of Hebrews said, in the past *“God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.”* John’s greatness was that he was blessed to identify Jesus as the Son of God, the true Light that enlightens the world. John’s greatness was that he testified to the Light, so that all might believe in Him. This is the ministry of the prophets. Testimony to Jesus is the essence of prophecy.

John was great in identifying and calling people to follow Jesus. He was lesser in terms of his own popularity and following. His purpose was not to promote himself. His purpose was to proclaim Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that John was wildly popular with the population of Galilee and Judea. He was a religious celebrity in his own right, as popular as any modern Christian celebrity. His celebrity waned when Jesus began to preach. This was something of a disappointment to his disciples. They lamented, *“Look everyone is going to Him.”* It was not a disappointment to John. He said, *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* John was great in the kingdom of heaven, because he knew he was called to make followers for Jesus, not for himself. The prophetic ministry of the church bears witness to Jesus Christ that we might believe and follow Him. He is the true Light that enlightens all who receive Him through faith.

John was very closed mouthed when it came to talking about himself. When the religious authorities asked who he was, he said only that he was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, *“Make straight the way of the Lord.”* If it wasn’t for Luke’s research into his background, we would know very little about him personally. All we would know is that he came to bear witness to the Light, Jesus Christ. Really that’s all we need to know. His purpose was to make Jesus known. He wasn’t trying to make a name for himself. He never referred to himself by name. He described himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. He was a voice. His voice proclaimed the coming of Jesus. His voice declared Him the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. His voice testifies to Jesus as the light, so we would put our faith in Him as our God and Saviour.

John was happy to be known as a servant of the Lord. What could be greater than being a servant of the Lord? In a certain sense John was the greatest servant of the Lord, because he was blessed to be the first to see Jesus is the Christ. He was the first to testify of Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was the first to proclaim Him as the light, so that people would put their faith in Him as their God and Saviour. There is nothing more important than knowing Jesus as the light of the world. There is nothing we can do that is of greater importance than telling others the good news of Jesus, so they too might believe and have life in His name.

John was blessed to be numbered among the prophets. Some great people served, suffered and died as prophets of the Lord. John embodied the prophetic ministry in his message, his appearance and in his location, calling out in the wilderness. Like many of the prophets, John the Baptist came to a cruel and unjust end. He was arrested by King Herod for exposing his sin and calling him to repent. He was executed to please the fancy of a dancing girl. She so enchanted the king that he promised to give her whatever she wanted, even half of his kingdom. She chose instead, the head of John presented to her on a platter. Such it was for many of the prophets. Although they were despised by the world and rejected by the majority of their own people, they were loved by God. In His name they called people to repentance. In His name they proclaimed the Christ who was to come and spoke the promise of forgiveness through faith in Him.

It is the same today for believers who proclaim the gospel of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' Name. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in the kingdom of heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*" John's reward in the world was a cruel and unjust death. So it goes even today. But no matter what we may suffer on account of Jesus, we are blessed to share the good news of Him as the Christ with others so they too may have life in Him. No matter how unjustly we are treated in the world, our blessing in time and eternity is to know Jesus as Saviour and have life in His name. Jesus is the light of the world and no darkness of life or shadow of death can eclipse His light.

John and the prophets witnessed to the light of Christ coming into the world. Through the witness of their words, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and illuminates our minds to see the light of Christ. As believers we participate in the prophetic ministry by sharing the light of Christ with other people, through the words of our lips and the actions of our lives. The purpose of the church on earth is not to make a name for itself. The church's purpose is to make Christ known as the Saviour of the world. Our purpose is not to make a name for ourselves. Our purpose is to make the name of Jesus known so others may believe. Believers throughout the earth carry on the prophetic ministry by making Jesus known as the Saviour of the world, calling women, children and men to repentance and faith in Him. John testified to Jesus so that all would believe and receive Him as their Saviour. We testify to Jesus for the same purpose to make Him known as Saviour, so that others also may believe and have life in His name.

The Lord bless us with His Holy Spirit this Advent season, both to believe in Jesus and to share the light of His salvation with others. In His Name. Amen