

ADVENT 2021

“A Voice Crying in the Wilderness”

John 1:6–13

Sunday December 12, 2021

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Scripture Reading

“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. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:6–13, ESV).

O LORD Jesus Christ, who, at your first coming, sent a messenger to prepare your way before you; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.*¹

Introduction

Let’s for a moment try to enter the political climate of Jewish people living in the time of Jesus. It has been centuries since the kingdoms of Israel and Judah have fallen. The glorious days of King David the Mighty and King Solomon the Wise are a faded memory. Now, all knees bow to the Caesar of Rome. God’s chosen people and God’s Promise Land are no more than a conquered people and an outlying province of a sprawling empire.

More importantly, it has been centuries since anyone has heard the voice of the Lord. Like Adam and Eve who sinned against God and were then exiled from the Garden of Eden and subjugated to sin, the Jewish people have rebelled against God and have consequently been exiled and subjugated to oppression. But even in the days of decline and exile, God sent the prophets to speak to his people. Prophets like Isaiah and Daniel reminded people of their call to seek righteousness and justice. The prophets were sent

¹ The Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 93.

to convict God's people of their sin, but also to point toward the hope of God's steadfast love.

The prophets even began to speak of a Messiah who God would soon send. This Messiah would be a Liberator-King, one who would fight against Israel's enemies and rule, protect, and provide for God's people. But then, the prophets stopped coming. With the death of Malachi, the final prophet of the Old Testament, the words of God ceased.

*And then there were four hundred years of absolute silence from the voice of God.**

If you were a Jew living in the first century, you would be asking some uncomfortable questions. Has God finally forsaken and forgotten his people? Have the promises of God been revoked? Will God ever speak again?*

But—suddenly—a voice awakens in the wilderness. A prophet of steps forward. He is clothed with camelhair, and he eats dessert locusts. But through this odd man, God is speaking yet again. And from the surrounding regions, crowds of tax collectors, soldiers, and religious leaders come to hear the Word of the Lord. This prophet fearlessly confronts the *sins* and *injustices* of his age. He challenges the people of God to repent and be baptized in water.

He is preparing the way for something. He proclaims that God is about to do something very big. His announces the first ever Advent.

So today, as we examine our passage of Scripture, I want to talk about the importance of this man, who is known in Scripture as **"A Voice Crying in the Wilderness."**

Exposition

This man I'm talking about is, of course, John the Baptist. This John is not John the disciple of Jesus who wrote Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, he is a crucially important character that appears in all four Gospel accounts. John the Baptist is the one chosen by God to announce to the world that the Light of the world was now shining in the darkness. John was the man chosen to proclaim that the great Messiah has finally arrived.

This morning I want to talk about John the Baptist as it relates to three major themes of his ministry and this text: **1.) The Witness to the Light, 2.) The Rejection of the Light, and 3.) The Children of the Light.**

1. The Witness to the Light.

Let's look back at our text: **"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. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light" (John 1:6–8).** If you are familiar with Christian subculture, you know that there is anomaly known as *the*

celebrity pastor. And there is no doubt that John was a celebrity. After all, he was God's mouthpiece and God had not spoken in four centuries! The masses flocked to him!

But something tells me he wouldn't have fit in very well on TBN Christian TV. I tend to doubt whether he would have been invited to speak at big church conferences.

By any definition, John the Baptist is the most bizarre celebrity pastor history has ever known. Rather than preaching a feel-good message to grow fame and crowds, John fiercely preaches against sin. Rather than wearing a tailored suit, John is dressed thickly matted camelhair. Rather than living in a mansion, driving a Bentley, and wearing sneakers that cost a thousand dollars, that John lives in the wilderness.

But *why*? John purposefully did not want attention for himself, but rather he wanted all people to pay attention to the One who would come after him—*Jesus the Messiah*.

I'll give you a few examples from Scripture. Later in this very chapter, when the religious leaders ask if John is God's Messiah, John says this: *"I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (1:26–27)*.

And later, after the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus—when the crowds begin to follow Jesus instead of John—here is what the prophet has to say: *"A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:27–30)*. *John's entire purpose for existence is point people toward Jesus*.

Now this is significant because John is in some ways the final and greatest prophet of God. Because of this unique position in redemptive history, when he says, "I am not the light, but I have come to bear witness to the light," *John is bringing into clarity the single purpose and intent of the entire Old Testament*. This has radical ramifications on how we should read the Bible.

The Bible is a book of laws and letters, poetry and proverbs, as well as human history and divine, apocalyptic visions. But how is it that we are to make sense of this seemingly random collection of literature? Should we read it like Aesop's fables, and view it as mere moral mythology? Should we read it as a how-to manual for life? Or is there a greater reality that the Bible is pointing us toward?

I know what John the Baptist would say. He would say every book, every law, and every line of the Bible, is not about us and what we can do—it is about Jesus and what he has done! This is not a book primarily about *good advice* that merely makes us *better* people; this is a book about *good news* that makes us *new* people.

John's life exists to point to Jesus. The Bible exists to point to Jesus. And whether you know it or not, *you* exist to point to Jesus. You will never know purpose, you will never know fulfillment, and you will never know joy until you recognize that it's not about you—it's all about the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

2. The Rejection of the Light.

Let's read the next few verses: "*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*" (1:9–11).

It is extraordinary that the Almighty God who existed before and beyond the realms of space and time was able to come into his own creation. Even more extraordinary he entered his own creation without *hardly anyone* noticing his arrival.

Even more perplexing is the fact that the Word who was with God and was God, the One who was the life and light of man, the One who made the covenant with Abraham, split the Red Sea for Moses, and filled the Temple with his presence came to his own chosen people—to the Jewish nation—and they *rejected* him!

The Lord Jesus Christ—Son of the Living God—entered into human history, and we *killed* him!*

Why? Why is it that we hate the Light? Later on in the very same book Jesus answers that question for us: "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil*" (3:16–19).

Simply said, we tend to reject Jesus because if Jesus really is God, then there are major ramifications. And we don't like those ramifications.

If Jesus is God, then Jesus is Lord and he is *worthy of more than our nominal adherence*. He is worthy of our worship, our allegiance, our adoration, our submission, and our obedience.

But we don't like submission. We like autonomy. We like independence. We like worshipping ourselves and creation rather than the Creator to whom we owe our being. Consequently, we will go to great lengths to ignore, minimize, or reject God.

We will use science to describe the consistent eloquence and order of the known universe, and then we will suggest that all of this order came from accidental chaos rather than a purposeful and powerful Creator. We will make passionate moral claims

about human rights and social ethics, but we will reject the notion of a personal and righteous God who is the necessary foundation for all moral obligation.

We will go to great irrational measures to make ourselves unaccountable to the Light. Famed astrophysicist Stephen Hawking once said, “*Religion is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.*” When asked to respond to this statement, Christian Mathematician John Lennox responded with the quip, “*Atheism is a fairy story for people afraid of the light.*”*

Now, when I mention atheism, the vast majority of you will think of someone else. You will think of your college professor or maybe a pundit on CNN. And truth be told, this type of explicit atheism is alive and well in our culture.

But far more dangerous for our context, is a life of practical atheism behind a Christian veneer. This is the type of life that content with saying that you believe in God, but then practically living as your own god.

We want to be in control. That is why we busy ourselves and sedate ourselves to the point of absurdity so we don’t have to feel personally obligated to God in any way.

We need to be honest enough with ourselves to know we all have this tendency to reject the Light. This is why we need the individual disciplines of reading Scripture, praying, and confessing our sin to God and one another. This why we need the corporate rhythms of worship, communion, fellowship, and service. We need to be reminded of the story of redemption in which we are called to play a role. We need to be reminded of the Light!

We have a gravitational longing to hide in our darkness. *But* there is hope.

3. The Children of the Light.

Remember, John the Baptist is a prophet, but he is not a normal prophet. He is the harbinger of something *profoundly new* that God is doing in human history. And that new thing is testified to at the end of our text.

The final two verses of today’s passage read: “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (1:12–13).

The Light has come; it has been witnessed to by John the Baptist, and indeed the entirety of the Old Testament. And even though we naturally desire darkness, God has promised salvation for all who would simply believe in Jesus. But notice this salvation is a salvation by *grace alone*. It does not come from the things that humans tend to value.

God’s salvation is not “*of blood,*” meaning that it has nothing to do with your family history, your nationality, or your race. It is not “*of the will of the flesh,*” meaning that it is not something you can earn or deserve through your own doing. It is not “*of the will of*

man,” meaning that this is not something resulting from your niceness, your intelligence, your will power, or anyone else’s will power.

Salvation is a gift of glorious divine grace—all the way down.

Even more, salvation is a gift so profound that it takes those who were once enemies of God and makes them his *children*. This means if you are a Christian, you can cry out to your God like a child would cry for his or her father!*

You are more than merely tolerated. You are more than off the naughty list. You are accepted and loved more than you could ever know.

Conclusion

In many ways the climax of John the Baptist’s ministry came on the day of *Jesus’s baptism*.

John was standing in the Jordan River, preaching about the need for repentance. And then suddenly someone caught his eye.

Jesus was coming forward to be baptized. It was in this moment that John fulfilled his life’s calling by announcing, “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*” (1:29). The trembling prophet then took Jesus and he baptized him. And as Light of the world came out of the water, heaven opened, and the voice of heaven proclaimed, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*” (Matthew 3:17).

You need to know, that if you are in Christ Jesus, God loves you just the same. To be a child of God—a child of the Light—is the privilege and right that is given to you by grace through faith in Jesus! If you are not yet a Christian, I plead with you to believe in the name of Jesus and to know God as your Father today!

Even in our society, there is a special word that we use when someone becomes part of our family by a way that doesn’t involve our blood or flesh. That word is *adoption*.

Adoption is an act of gracious love—whether it be by man or by God—that comes at a great price. And Jesus has come into this world to pay that price—the price of his very life, sacrificed for us on the cross. But by the power of his resurrection he has purchased adoption for all who would believe in him.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines the theological doctrine of adoption this way: “*Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.*”

The late, great theologian J.I. Packer writes perhaps my favorite description of the significance of adoption. He describes it this way in his book *Knowing God*:

You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.²

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who—like John the Baptist—are committed to bearing witness to the Light. May we flee from our own darkness, and rejoice that the Light of God has shown. May we might trust in Jesus and know God as our Heavenly Father!

AMEN.

² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 201–202.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities:

- 1) *Read John 1:6–11. What do these verses show us about John the Baptist?*
- 2) *Choose a few sections from the four gospel accounts about John the Baptist. What were some of the ways that the life of John the Baptist pointed to Jesus? What are some practical ways to point our own lives to Christ?*
- 3) *We have a natural tendency to hide in our own darkness rather than be exposed by the light. What are some practical ways to walk in the light as followers of Jesus?*
- 4) *Read John 1:12–13. What are the ways we cannot be saved? What is the one way we can be saved? What is the importance about viewing yourself as a child of God?*