

If you ever have had the life-giving opportunity of worshiping in an AME congregation or another African American congregation, you will likely have heard the pastor cry out from the pulpit, “Can I get a witness?” And, you will likely have heard members of the congregation eagerly respond by saying, “Yes” or “Amen.” Well, if the John we meet in today’s Gospel reading were in the congregation to hear this question, you can bet he surely would raise his hand or stand up and enthusiastically respond by saying, “I’ll be a witness!”

In today’s reading, we meet John, the first human mentioned in the Gospel of John. This lone character, John, is the star of today’s show and he is a man **sent** from God. It is important to note that he is **not** identified as John the Baptist as we find in Matthew’ gospel. He is **not** identified as John the baptizer as in Mark. And, he is **not** identified as John the son of Zechariah as in Luke. He is simply identified as John. He is **John the Witness**. While he is described as doing some general baptizing here and there, a careful read of this gospel writer’s story of Jesus’ baptism reveals that John does not even baptize Jesus. His primary role is not as one who baptizes but one who **testifies** to the light coming into the world. In John’s gospel, this John character is a very human **witness** to a cosmic event.

God is about the business of ordering a new creation, a new presence of light in the world, but this effort necessitates a fellow human to point **to** the presence of this light. Otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it. So, that human is John.

Smack dab in the middle of the out of this world, beyond time and space beginnings of this fourth gospel, interrupting the unfolding of a truly cosmic birth story, this character called John appears, testifying to the light. Well, his testimony brings on all kinds of questions. So down from the capital come the interrogators, and the result is a fierce press conference. “Who do you think you are?” “Do you think you’re the messiah?” “Are you representing yourself as Elijah?” “Why are you baptizing like this?” “What do you say about yourself?” The questions ricochet like rifle shots bouncing off walls. The aim of these questions is not to imply something false, but rather to reveal some damaging truth, to show that this threatening figure of John is just a cracked and broken cistern like the rest of humanity. After all, just maybe he *does* think he is Elijah incarnate, or worse, fancies himself the actual messiah and comes seeking fame and glory. If so, you can be certain John will be splayed out like a mere politician on the campaign trail, revealed as a damaged and flawed human being, full of worldly ambition, hubris and self-delusion.

But John's answer is quite surprising. "It's **not** about me," he replies. "I'm pointing beyond myself to one who comes after me, to the Lamb of God. My whole life has now become a gesture to what God is doing to shake the foundations of the status quo and re-create the world." You see, because John has a holy vocation, not merely a human ambition, the fear of exposure before the glare of interrogation vanishes. **He does not fear!** "Find all the flaws you want and smoke out all the vanities you can find," he seems to say. "The meaning of my life is not in what you think about me, but how you respond to the one to whom my life points."

John identifies himself in, through, and by his relationship to the light, to the One who is coming, to the One known as Jesus, to the One who is shaking the status quo and recreating the world. And, whereas the One who is coming, this One who is recreating the world, defines himself as "I AM," John is clear to say, "I am **not**." He is **not** the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. He is **not** the light that shines in the darkness. Yet, even in his resolute claims about who he is **not**, who he **is** and why he is here is defined **by** and inseparable **from** the presence of the Word made flesh in his midst. He knows nothing but to articulate his identity and live out that identity in connection to Jesus' identity. John's sole vocation in this fourth

gospel is to bear witness to the Word made flesh, to bear witness to the light. In fact, in this gospel, John is the **lead** witness on Jesus' behalf.

It is fascinating to note that the verb "witness" is used thirty-three times in the gospel of John but only twice in the entirety of the other three gospels. John's role is to recognize the true light when it appears and to testify to that light. John does **not** fear as he stakes his life on his call to testify to the light so that others may recognize it and believe – that is, recognize, trust in, and commit themselves to the light. John truly understands his role and who he is. He is **not** the Messiah. That job has already been filled. He simply lives his life pointing **to** the Messiah.

Like the man whose name was John, the church is sent **into** today's world as a **witness**. And, when we look at today's reading and John's witness, we find we may characterize this witness as **public, certain, and humble**. These qualities are in tension with the spirit of our age. Most people today regard religion as a private matter and do not want to hear about someone else's particular beliefs. Most people want to keep their personal beliefs quiet, staying safe and cocooned in their comfortable bubble, not getting their hands dirty because any other way of living is too risky. Furthermore, certainty is also shunned in these postmodern times; we are all victims of our own perspectives: who can ever know for sure

whether anything is true or not? Still, we who claim to follow Jesus are **audacious** enough to believe that the gospel is **true**, and that it must be **lived out** in our daily lives and **proclaimed boldly -- publicly and confidently, without fear**. The trick is to bear witness to this truth with humility. For John, that meant directing people away from himself and toward Jesus.

As we think about what it means to be a witness, the truth of the matter is, our testimony about Jesus is ultimately less significant than Jesus' testimony about us. As Professor Mark Allen Powell writes, "Sure, share your opinions and beliefs about Jesus with friends, neighbors, and strangers (if they'll listen), but that's all you've got, beliefs and opinions. The testimony of Jesus himself is so much more powerful. His words **are** the Word of God. And, his actions are an incarnation of that Word, putting **us all** on trial with public testimony. The light of God's love and the darkest parts of humanity come together, and there need be no postmodern squabbling over what happens when darkness and light try to co-exist: the truth of what happens is public and certain."

In this Advent season, our reading on this Sunday calls us to trust God's living Word to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and to **live out** our faith by trusting **in** and pointing **to** that One who is greater than ourselves.

We are called to **live** our lives pointing to that light that has entered the world, pointing to the God who is shaking the foundations of the status quo, transforming our lives and recreating the world in our midst. Such is **our** baptismal vocation as we are called to bear witness to the light. Can I get a witness?