

## **Southport Presbyterian Church**

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### **A Witness to the Light**

**John 1:6-9**

We are in that busy time of the year when tired, frustrated people lose their patience. Consider the woman who was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened their ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed, she was boiling over and blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up and shot!" A few on the elevator resonated with her and grunted in agreement.

Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't worry. They already crucified Him."

With all of the shopping, parties, gala festivities, school programs and other demands on your time, have you found yourself feeling the same kind of frustration? If so, I would invite you during the next few moments to take a deep breathe and relax. Just for a few short moments, set aside your lists of gifts to buy and schedules to keep and, and travel back with me to be along side of one who was there with Jesus from the beginning. He was a witness to the Light.

Of course, I am speaking of none other than John the Baptist whom we often talk about during the season of Advent. While John the Baptist was intense and quite eccentric, he really embodies what our attitude should be as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas.

Please follow along with me as I read John 1:6-9 after which I want to make 4 observations about this passage that help us become witnesses to the Light of the World whose birthday we will celebrate in less than two weeks.

#### **First observation: John was sent by God to be a witness to the light.**

In a unique way, before he was born, God had a purpose for John the Baptist. When we look at Luke's Gospel, we find the touching story of the priest, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, who was also from the family of Aaron, the tribe from which the priests came. We would call them "PKs" today- "priest's kids."

Even though they grew up in a priest's home, they were "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." With all of that said they felt like they had a cloud hanging over their heads because they were infertile and were getting along in years.

It was into this setting that the Lord worked a special miracle. I won't take the time to go into all of the details. Go read it for yourselves if you are not familiar with the story. Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a son, whom they were to call John. He would be a joy and a delight to them.

So like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Hannah and Elkanah, God blessed them in their infertility with a son who would be a special instrument of God in their world. John

would be the last of the Old Testament prophets, coming after 400 years with no prophetic voice being heard in Israel.

While a priest is one who speaks on behalf of the people to God, a prophet is one sent by God to speak a particular word to God's people. John was such a man. He was sent by God to be a witness to the One who would be the Light of the world.

Friends, I believe, in the same way, you and I are sent by God to be witnesses to the One who came as the Light of the world. In Acts 1:8, just before He ascended into heaven, Jesus challenged His disciples by saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Like John, you and I are sent from God to be witnesses to the Light.

Because it makes the point, I want to share a story that I shared with you in the past. My last year in seminary, I was doing an independent story about how God was still calling people today by the power of His Spirit to speak on His behalf to our world.

I heard that world-renown Hebrew scholar, Abraham Heschel, who had written a classic book on the Old Testament prophets, would be speaking at the University of Louisville. Since I knew that my professor really liked Heschel, I went to hear his lecture, hoping to get a quote that might impress him.

After his lecture offered me nothing that I could use, I got into a long line, waited for 20 minutes, and finally was able to ask Heschel the burning question that would make for a great quote: "Dr. Heschel, do you think there are prophets today?"

Heschel quickly blurted out, "Yes," and turned to the next person in line. Thinking that "yes" wouldn't be a very good quote; I got back in line and waited for 15 minutes to ask a follow-up question of the venerable scholar.

"Dr. Heschel, if there are prophets today, who are they?" Quickly he answered in wonderfully Jewish fashion, "There is a little bit of prophet in all of us," and moved to the person behind me in the line.

While not what I had hoped for, I have used Heschel's words many times through the years. "There is a little bit of prophet in all of us." All of us have been sent by God to be witnesses to the Light.

## **Second observation: John was a witness to the light so that all might believe.**

Much of John's ministry took place in a rugged part of the country out by the Jordan River. Dressed like the Old Testament Prophet, Elijah, John the Baptist looked much like what we think of as a "mountain man." He was a striking figure with a real sense of charisma.

Curious and hungry for a word from the Lord, the people came out to the wilderness to see and hear John in action. Much like Billy Graham in our day, people from all walks of life made the pilgrimage to the desert to experience John.

Like the firebrand prophets of old, John passionately called the people to repentance from their sins. As a symbol of what the Lord wanted to do in their lives, they would step into the Jordan River and be baptized. Before this time, baptism was a ritual used for outsiders becoming Jews. Now Jews were submitting themselves to the soul cleansing waters.

John's reason for testifying to the One who would come as the Light was so that all people might believe in the God who wanted to be in relationship with them. That little word "all" is really important. Not only did it go beyond gender and socio-economic status, it also provided an opening for the people who were far from God to come and begin a journey with

Him. John's testimony to the light so that all might believe was inclusive and so much in concert with Jesus' ministry to all people.

Like John, we are also called to be witnesses testifying to the Light. To be a witness who testifies in a court of law, one simply tells what he has seen and heard. He shares what he knows.

I'm afraid that we are not very good witnesses today. We are so concerned about being politically correct so as not to offend someone that we are reticent to be witnesses who testify concerning what the Light has done in our lives. We don't want people to think we are religious fanatics, so we keep quiet when we should bear authentic witness to the Light.

In essence, we are so concerned about how we look and sound, that we withhold the greatest news ever to come to our world. We are so concerned about shoving something down someone's throat that we don't point him to the One who can transform his life for the better. In our desire to be inclusive, we have become exclusive, withholding the Light from people who are walking in darkness and desperately need to see their way.

This is true of our culture. We hardly ever mention the name of the One whose birthday we are celebrating. For example I read this week that during the Christmas season, 90 % of TV programming does not have any kind of a spiritual theme. 7% had a religious or spiritual theme but did not refer to Jesus. Only 3 % of Christmas programming actually focused on Jesus.

If John the Baptist walked with you for a day, how would he feel about you? If he visited SPC what would he say about how we witness to the light? I have a feeling that he would be sad and maybe upset. Much like he did with the religious people of his day, I can hear him calling us to repentance for not witnessing to the Light.

### **Third observation: John understood his own identity as he witnessed to the light.**

John, one of Jesus' own disciples, had seen John the Baptist in action and he writes, "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." John possessed a genuine humility, knowing first who he was not called to be. Even though thousands of people were coming out to see and hear him, he knew he wasn't the Messiah, the "Anointed One," the Light.

But John also knew and was faithful to his calling to be a witness to the light. He was not the star, but the one who pointed to the star. He was to be a supporting actor. He was to be the herald who proclaimed that the King was coming.

In honest humility, John could say in John 3:30, "He must increase and I must decrease." John's humility made him a very effective witness to the light.

In like manner, as those who also are sent by God to be witnesses to the light so that all people might believe, it is crucial for us to know our place. We must recognize that we are not the star, but are only meant to point to the star. We are the ones who are to be the heralds proclaiming Christ's coming to the world in which we live.

How well are we doing? Are people far from God seeing and experiencing the light because of our genuine humility?

### **Final observation: John witnessed to the true light coming into the world.**

Again, listen to what the Gospel writer says at this point, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." Jesus, the baby born in a humble stable, was God, once for all, saying I care this much that I am coming in human form so that you might be able to relate to me.

The Early Church Father, Augustine, understood this truth well when he wrote: “God became a man for this purpose: since you, a human being, could not reach God, but you can reach out to other humans, you might now reach God through a Man. And so the man Christ Jesus became the mediator of God and human beings.

God became a man so that following a man—something you are able to do—you might reach God, which formerly impossible to you.”

Do you see the point? Jesus came as the true light shining brightly into the life of every person who would ever see Him, so that each person could know and have an authentic relationship with our great Creator God. That’s the message of this wondrous season.

Listen to how N. T. Wright puts it as he attempts to make the same point: “Christmas is not about the living God coming to tell us everything’s all right. John’s gospel isn’t about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying: ‘Of course! Why didn’t we realize it before?’ It is about God shining his clear, bright torch into the darkness of our world, our lives, our hearts, our imaginations—and the darkness not comprehending it. It’s about God, God as a little child, speaking words of truth, and nobody knowing what he’s talking about.”

## **Application**

Dear friends, it is critically important for you and me to witness to the light during this and every season in the world where we live. Listen to this wonderful story of one family’s witness to the light as told by Lee Strobel, former legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and now author and speaker.

It seems that Strobel was assigned to report on the struggles of an impoverished, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. A devout atheist at the time, Strobel was mildly surprised with the family’s attitude in spite of their circumstances. Listen to what he wrote:

“The Delgados—60-year-old Perfecta and her granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny—had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny two-room apartment on the West Side. As I walked in, I couldn’t believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That’s it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.

In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.”

Even though Strobel moved on to other more high profile stories, he couldn’t forget the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God’s providence. Strobel writes: “I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith—and inside felt empty and barren as their apartment.”

In the middle of a slow news day, Strobel decided to pay another visit to the Delgados. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations. Once inside Strobel encountered new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents; bags of food; and a large selection of warm winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Strobel, an atheist in the midst of Christmas generosity. It was the family's response to those gifts. In his words: "As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: 'Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would do.'"

That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all these goodies, and again her response amazed me: 'This is wonderful; this is good,' she said gesturing toward the largess. 'We did nothing to deserve this—it's a gift from God. But, it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.'

To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything—more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, I saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters.

They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material—and something made me long for what they had. Or, more accurately, for the One they knew."

Dear friends, I pray that you and I like John the Baptist and the Delgados might have the courage to be witnesses to the light. Right now, ask God to help you be a witness to the light in your sphere of influence.