

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Epiphany, January 13, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 63, 179, 272, 342, 328

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11, Acts 19:1-5, John 1:6-28.

Sermon Text: John 1:6-9

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

By this sixth verse of his gospel, the apostle John has not yet identified exactly who the Word with the light is. We know, of course, and talked about that in our first sermon from John's gospel for December 30. We know that John is leading up to plainly identifying him as Jesus Christ in verse 14: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14) But in this verse, the writer begins talking about John the Baptist. This is important, because apparently some people were following John the Baptist instead of Jesus or in other ways were confused about the missions of the two men. From now on in this sermon, every reference to "John" is John the Baptist.

In presenting Jesus Christ as the light and life of the world, it is important that we realize that many witnesses, including John, pointed forward to the coming of the Savior. This gospel reveals John's testimony for this purpose: *"so that through him all men might believe."*

That is the hope of every witness for Christ, that *"all men might believe."* Today let's review

THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

- 1. John was sent to witness, to testify about Jesus, the Savior.**
- 2. Jesus is the center of John's witnessing.**

John the Baptist was sent from God *"as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."* Our entire gospel lesson, from which our sermon is drawn, tells us more about the testimony of John. He was to give witness about the Light.

This gospel uses the noun "witness" 14 times, more than any other book in the New Testament. This gospel also uses the verb "testify" 33 times, more often than anywhere else in the New Testament.

People were not to believe "in" John but "through" him. This gospel says almost nothing about the unusual physical appearance of John and his living and working in the wilderness across the Jordan River, at a place called Bethany, where we are told there was a ford for easy crossing of the river. We read in Matthew 3:4: *"John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey."*

This gospel concentrates on his message. This is the way it must always be. I have heard that Martin Luther wore a black robe, his robe as a doctor of theology, instead of the elaborate, colorful robes and vestments common in the Roman Catholic church, because his simple robe helped emphasize the message of the pastor and de-emphasize the personality of the person in the pulpit or leading worship.

We must remember the main purpose of this Gospel – and really, of all scripture: *"that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:31) This whole gospel is written to show the truth that Jesus is the promised Messiah and to present him as the Son of God sent to redeem mankind from all sin, so that the readers may believe in him. This gospel repeats the verb "believe" about 100 times, more than any other book of the Bible.

When we realize the emphasis on witnessing and testifying to Jesus in this book of the Bible so that men may believe in him, we begin to see why this gospel is one of the most popular bible tracts or pamphlets given to people so that they may learn about Jesus Christ.

John points to Jesus and tells people to believe in the Word, the life, the light. No other means of coming to God exists. Knowing God, accepting him, and trusting him are all part of believing in him who is the light.

Jesus is the true light, not just a reflection. ***“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”*** He ***“gives light to every man.”*** He does not restrict his light. Only those who refuse it in unbelief must go without it. That light ***“was coming into the world”*** so that all might know him.

A few verses later, after talking about Jesus, the evangelist comes back to talking about John, or more specifically John’s message. ***“John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”***

John emphasizes that Jesus is more important than he is. But it almost sounds like a riddle: ***“He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.”*** You and I can understand. John’s public ministry started before Jesus’ public ministry. We don’t know how long John was preaching and baptizing before Jesus came to be baptized and to begin his ministry. So in that sense Jesus followed the ministry of John. But Jesus was greater than John and in the course of the history of all things was before John, because he is the eternal, only-begotten Son of God. Christ’s ministry came after John chronologically, but he was before, that is, greater than his messenger in regard to honor, authority, power, and glory.

Jesus was coming to bring blessings – blessings beyond measure. John talks about him and later we have the picture of John pointing to Jesus and exclaiming ***“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** (John 1:29)

It is because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that is, God’s undeserved love and mercy that we receive blessings – things like the knowledge that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, the assurance of faith that I am justified before God through Christ, forgiveness of sins, peace, hope, the witness that I am a child of God, joy, comfort and confidence to pray.

John speaks of a contrast between law and gospel. Moses gave the moral law that reveals God’s will and shows our sin. He gave ceremonial laws that foreshadowed the redeeming work of Christ, and he gave prophecies that promised the Savior to come.

Now the Savior has come. In his grace he has fulfilled God’s moral law perfectly in our place. He has offered the one sacrifice needed for all time, for all sin of all mankind. He has turned the promises of Moses into completed facts and established God’s truthfulness forever.

Out of the fullness of Jesus we all have received blessings from God’s grace. Christ is the Word of God Incarnate. He brings grace and truth from God. Grace, the fullness of the assurance of free pardon, and truth, the Word of the Gospel which proclaims grace and mercy, came through Jesus Christ, who came down in His own person, not only to preach the Gospel, but to make its proclamation possible. And remember, God is the essence of faithfulness and mercy toward all men. But His essence is hidden before the eyes of men.

Jesus has come to reveal God to us and to make us God’s children. ***“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”***

No mere human being can make God known as Jesus does, because no human being has seen God in all his fullness and glory. Jesus is the one and only, the only begotten Son of God. He is at the Father’s side; literally, in the bosom of the father from everlasting to everlasting. He has a personal, fully intimate relationship with the Father. The glorious intimacy of the Holy Trinity was never interrupted. He makes God known to us. Look at Jesus Christ and see God.

John puts all the emphasis on Jesus. We read of a specific occasion, when priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem, asking ***“‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”*** It is as if they are accusing John: Who are YOU? Whom do

you claim to be? What authority do you have to proclaim such a message? The implication was that John might be the promised Messiah. In his answers, John makes it clear that he was not the one he talked about. He is simply the voice announcing the coming of the Lord. He underemphasized, he deemphasized his role. He is just the forerunner, the advance man, the one who prepares the path for Jesus.

He also rejected the honor of being called the second Elijah in the sense that his was the actual person of Elijah, returned to the world in his former flesh and blood. It had been prophesied in Malachi chapter 4 that Elijah the prophet should come as the forerunner of the Messiah, that is, that a prophet in the power and spirit of Elijah would prepare the way for Christ. And Jesus expressly states in Matthew 17 that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come. But because of the false understanding that the Jews had of this Elijah, John could not admit that identity without misleading them. He denied, in the third place, that he was 'that prophet'. For the Jews understood the prophecy of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, where we read ***"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers"*** to be some special prophet, a faithful prophet who was to end the prophetic period and usher in the Messianic reign. John says 'no, I am not the prophet you are falsely thinking will come'. Actually, Jesus was that prophet of whom Moses spoke. But John did make a definite confession concerning himself, referring to the prophecy in our Old Testament lesson. ***"John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*** He was the voice of one in the wilderness, calling loudly and urgently that people should make straight and level the way of the Lord. The Messiah was about to come to His people, and Israel was to prepare the way for Him by sincere repentance. Only those who sincerely acknowledge their sins and repent of them may obtain salvation in Christ. That was a most important part of John's ministry, to call Israel to repentance.

We read of another specific occasion, when Pharisees had been sent to question him about his baptism. He pointed to the greatness of Jesus by pointing out that he wasn't even worthy of bowing before Jesus and untying his sandals. ***"I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'"***

Matthew, Mark, and Luke also all write of John. The Word of God is consistent in reporting that John emphasized that he was not the important one, but was only preparing the way for the important one, Jesus. ***"He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.'"***

John was trying to show people the light of Jesus Christ. We need to show people everywhere the light of Jesus Christ. Only then can they believe and inherit eternal life. Like John, all believers everywhere want to show people the light of Jesus Christ. Today we can find many people who get so caught up in a cause that it becomes their entire life. It could be politics. It could be raising money or peoples' interest to fight a particular disease. It could be a particular environmental cause. But remember the purpose of this gospel, and really the entire Bible. The purpose of this gospel is plainly repeated in chapter 20: ***"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*** (John 20:30-31)

May we be willing, may God give us the strength and words, may we witness for Christ, too, every day! May we get really caught up in the cause of Jesus! Amen.