



Dec 17: Testify | John 1:6-8, 19-28

Did you grow up watching cop or lawyer shows, courtroom dramas? Perry Mason, the New Perry Mason, Matlock, Cagney and Lacey, and Jag? The lawyer would tell the Judge, **“I’d like to call our next witness to the stand.”**

And then the bailiff would step forward with a Bible in hand, next to the witness box, and “swear in” the witness. The witness would place one hand on that Bible and place the other hand up, palm out. While the Bailiff asked these essential questions.

Remember those questions? We probably have them memorized.

“Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So, help you God?” Holding our breath until we heard that fateful promise, **“I do.”** Which sealed the deal. They had to speak the truth now.

Since they had to speak the truth, the questions would begin to fly! Questions, cross-examination, all to get to the truth of things. Made possible because the witness was willing to be a good witness and testify honestly.

That’s what it means to “testify”. To tell the honest truth, in your own words, of what happened, what you saw and what you experienced on a particular day.

That’s what’s going on here with John the Baptist. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent some priests and Levites to get to the bottom of things and figure out who this John really was. What’s John’s story? Is he just a crackpot? Or Elijah? Or the Messiah? They had questions.

And John confessed honestly. In the face of some pointed and intense questioning, he witnessed to who he was and who he was not. “I am not the Messiah.” Elijah? I am not. The Prophet? No. He told the truth of who he wasn’t.

And then in a sentence or two, he explained who he was. How his story was part of God’s story.

That’s not easy to do. To answer questions, be honest with who you are, and mindful of how God is at work in your life. To be able to talk clearly about all that.

I envy John. The time he spent in the desert, not the eating locusts part. The lesson to be learned, how solitude helps us shut out distractions and unhelpful voices, to hone in on God's voice and simultaneously become clear about who we are.

I was in college when I first came across John. Of his testimony about Jesus being the Light of the World and being honest about himself and his own ministry. I was intrigued by John's character and the clarity with which he saw himself.

Intrigued...well, more like dubious. Was it even possible to become as clear as John? Just for really holy people? Was it even necessary?

I was in college at Bemidji State University and confused, trying to figure out life and who I was. I was feeling the pressure to find answers. College is a time to do that. But I also thought college was the only time you could do that.

I was asking myself a ton of questions...who am I, what roles and career do I want to pursue? Lots of voices.

My dad wanted me to be a dutiful daughter and take care of him. My mom wanted me to get married and have babies. My brothers thought I was a prude because I wouldn't drink with them. I thought I wanted to be an English teacher.

But I sensed my identity, my sense of who I was, was shifting more off self, my plans, and wanting to be an English teacher. And more on to Jesus and...I don't know!? I wasn't sure what was next? And I didn't appreciate God disrupting my life, stirring things up.

Whether you went to college or not, I think we all deal with identity issues one way or another. And we know now, we wrestle with who we are all throughout life.

We know what this is like, asking these kinds of questions of ourselves. We've all probably experienced at different times in our lives how the world, and workplace, our friends and family try to tell us how to identify ourselves...dutiful daughter, good wife and mom, fun sister, an inspiring teacher.

And many times, though well meaning, their conclusions do not necessarily align with who we really are. A bit of a mismatch.

Sometimes, we end up labeling ourselves in ways that allow others to categorize us. To live in ways that make others more comfortable with us. They pigeonhole us and we let them because their anxiety goes down, peace for awhile.

And we try to live that way for awhile...serving other people's vision of who we are. Until the pain of that mismatch becomes too much and we have to shed that skin, shed that lie. Or we grow out of it.

Like I said, it's not easy.

But as we prepare for Jesus this Advent, we are being called to live into our identity in Christ, who we are from God's perspective. That's what it means to testify to the light of Christ in our own lives. Jesus helps us continue to grow into our truest identity.

As it turns out, this text has a lot to tell us about identity, being who we are and not being who we are not; as we look at identity through the example and person of John the Baptism. Let's take a look at our passage.

John testifies to those questioning him. John explains his ministry and their blindness,

“I baptize with water but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” John knew his job. And he knew Jesus was going to begin his ministry soon and people were not going to “get” Jesus. And that Jesus was greater.

Jesus has always already been present. If we remember John chapter 1, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.**

⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

And now Jesus was to come in a new, special way in the incarnation (becoming human), born as a baby in a manger. John knew this Jesus, Jesus was his flesh and blood, first cousin after all.

Through Advent, we are talking about “preparing” but here John shows us that part of preparing for Jesus to come anew is to testify or bear witness to the ways we've already experienced Jesus. Again “testify” legally means to simply say what we have seen and personally experienced. To testify as a Christian, is simply to tell our stories of what God has done in our lives.

Consider how John was being challenged by the Pharisees. Testifying was not easy or smooth. Testifying can be difficult for us too, especially when people are not receptive. The words used to describe John's testimony are that **“he confessed**

and did not deny” (v. 20). It took courage and confidence to do this, regardless of how the Pharisees might judge, reject or criticize him.

So often, in conversations about faith, we fear what others will think. What does it look like to push through, be true to ourselves, and confess who Jesus is for us?

Sometimes we join a ministry, become part of what’s happening at church. Sometimes we join a book study and find our voice in that setting. Some write about it, sing about it, and even dance or do a special reading.

I see your faith and your testimony played out over and over in your service. It is strong here!

We often have to find an outlet of some kind in our lives as a way to testify to all of God’s goodness.

When John the Baptist is clear that he is not “the One” (verse 20). He is putting God first. Just as John was not putting himself down, this doesn’t mean we do that either. We don’t put ourselves down. But it is a reminder to us and others that God is first. It is a call to authenticity.

John is honest about who he is. The Pharisees are asking John who he is; they want him to claim a central role here for himself. They expect him to claim the kind of role/power/identity for himself that they do for themselves. They want him to play their game.

How often does the world ask us to be a certain way, to achieve, to make a name for ourselves? But God is not asking John – or us – to do anything more than simply say who we are and where God interacts and enters our lives.

Our faith often calls for the kind of authenticity and witness that the world does not promote or want to hear, but our testimony often requires that kind of honesty. And truth be told, our stories of God’s inbreaking are often about the least “pretty” or “shiny” parts of our lives. That’s not easy either.

Recently, as a church, we were able to hear some testimonies of God’s interactions in our lives. Often it was in very difficult times, painful places where God made himself know. The stories were powerful and so God-honoring. I hope we find more ways to share and hear our stories.

Because the truth is, I know some of you had stories you wanted to tell. You wanted to testify but you were shy. And because, God is always at work in our lives. And the more we look the more we see God’s activity. Therefore, we are full of stories.

I would encourage all of us to continue thinking along these lines. It is always so encouraging for all of us when we hear how God is active in other people's lives.

Truth be told, we are all on John's journey of identity clarification. John got to it pretty quick! But for some of us, it takes a lot longer to know who we are and how God is at work in our lives. New stages of life and new challenges bring new clarity and deeper understanding. But have I mentioned, it's not easy?

So, for some good news, for some encouragement on that journey...that can be a bit longer and more trying than we want. Let me testify, let me tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Here are some phrases that have helped me with my sense of identity in Christ.

And let God testify, let God thru the Spirit tell us the truth of how he sees us.

Listen as God speaks these truths about who you truly are.

"You are forgiven, redeemed, and cleansed."

"You are my child and free from condemnation."

"You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

"I have loved you with an everlasting love."

"I have chosen you and not rejected you."

"I have called you by name and you are mine."

As we move into a time of reflection

I would encourage you to reflect on these truths of your identity. Maybe pick one that seems to especially speak to your heart today. Carry it with you, repeat it to yourself, it is God's gift to you.