

Preparing for the Lord

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 His man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. 8 He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. ... 19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord,"' as the prophet Isaiah said." 24 Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. 25 And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. 27 It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." 28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. John 1:6-8, 19-28

Context:

1. Author of the Gospel of John
 - a. It is attributed to John, the apostle
 - 1) John is never directly mentioned in this book, except as the "**Beloved**" disciple.
 - Of all people, John's Gospel is about pointing to Jesus and toppling the **hero worship** some have of religious leaders
 - For John to have referred to himself in such a manner would be awkward, hypocritical, and uncharacteristic
 - It was more than likely the way John's **disciples** felt about him
 - Therefore it was more than likely written by one of John's disciples, based upon John's story
 - 2) The Gospel of John was written about **100 AD**
 - John was an OLD man, but still alive and kicking
 - This is likely the **last** book of the Bible to be written.
 - b. The John who wrote the Gospel must not be confused with John the Baptist.
 - 1) John the Baptist
 - son of Zechariah, the priest, and Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary (Jesus' mom)
 - 2nd cousin of Jesus
 - He was NOT one of the **disciples** of Jesus
 - 2) John, the apostle
 - was the only disciple of Jesus who died of **old age**
 - his brother James was also a disciple of Jesus: together, they were the sons of Zebedee ("**thunder**")
 - All the rest of the apostles were **executed**
 - I, II, III John and Revelation are also attributed to this John
2. To whom was it written
 - a. It was written to **Gentiles**
 - Christianity, during the 1st Century, was considered to be a Jewish **cult**
 - This began to change due to the missionary outreach of the apostles, and due to the diaspora (see last week's sermon). Christianity was finding its own **identity**

- Most Christians, by the end of the 1st Century, were Greek speaking Gentiles.
- b. Two of the concerns that John has of these new Christians are addressed in today's lesson
- The hero worship expressed by 2nd and 3rd generation Christians of the founders of the church
 - The influence of Greek **philosophy** in shaping Christianity, in particular, of Gnosticism

About Gnosticism and why it is STILL a threat to Christianity: Evidence of this philosophy can be seen in Plato, who believed that there is the real world, and the perfect world to which we aim: everything physical and material is faulty and evil, and everything of the spirit is of God. This dualism is NOT Christian theology, but a heresy, even though many Christians believe this. Gnosticism has greatly influenced the religious trappings of our faith: 1) that our spirits can exist separately from our body and go to heaven after our death (*we believe in resurrected life, and that the body is a necessary component of life*) 2) that sex is dirty (*notice how much of the slang we use for sex diminishes the beauty of it*) 3) the immaculate conception of Mary (*which originated because of our belief that it is the sex between the parents that passes on the sinful nature to the child*) 4) the separation of our business practices from our spirituality (*"it's nothing personal, it's only business."*) 5) Diminishing our humanity by excusing our faulty behavior with "I'm only human." (*According to the bible, to be human means to be created in the image of God. Our humanity makes us great, not frail and sinful—Genesis 1:26*) John shakes up this whole dualistic notion by claiming that God crashes into our existence with Jesus, which is totally an inconceivable concept for the Gnostics. By so doing, God is placing a claim on our physical existence: it is worthy, holy and beautiful.

- c. About the Prophets
- Israel had not had a prophet for **400** years!
 - You can imagine how incredulous the religious leaders were of John the Baptist.
 - The story narrative of the Gospel of John, not surprisingly, begins with the religious leaders confronting John the Baptist (**Story:** This is like in *Lord of the Rings* that the Stewards of Gondor had never sat on the throne, but at the seat under the king's throne. In theory they believed that a King would, someday, return. However, they never really expected it to happen, it was just a part of the popular mythology)

The Text

Vs. 6—"**Witness**" is one of the main themes of John's Gospel.

1. The Gospel of John establishes **8** witnesses to the character, quality, and role of Jesus, then allows us to decide what we will do with this Jesus.
2. John the Baptist is the **first** of the witnesses

Vs. 19-- "*This is the witness of John (the Baptist)...*"

1. John the Baptist was given a high position by many of his followers
 - a. The Gospel of John always paints John the Baptist in a submissive, almost **anonymous** light.

- b. As late as 250 AD, the book *Clementine's Recognitions* tells us that there were still followers of John the Baptist who thought of him as the true **Messiah**.
- In Acts 19:3-4, there are those who only know of the **baptism** of John, not of Jesus, who need to be set straight by Paul.
 - John had been a **cult-like** figure, and the author wants to emphasize Jesus by demonstrating John's self-deprecation.
 - John the Baptist was the greatest preacher and prophet the world has known; and yet, never does John the Baptist draw attention to himself.
 - This is a reminder that it is the **message** that is important, not the person who brings the message.

About Clementine's Recognitions: This is a work attributed to Pope Clement I, along with another 20 book volume of homilies. Tradition says that Clement was installed as Bishop of Rome by Peter. *Recognitions* is supposedly a record of Clement's relationship with Peter. However, this book was written long after Clement. The only extant book that truly has a historical connection to Clement is *I Clement*, a book written to the Corinthians that NEARLY made it into our Bible. As a personal note, I Clement is one of my favorite books by one of our early church fathers, and it really ought to be read. The only disqualifying factor for the book's inclusion into the Christian canon is that Clement did

2. The opposition to the witness... "***The Jews***"
- a. This is truly a sensitive issue for us Christians.
- John has been used as an **anti-Semitic** book, and we must ALWAYS speak against this abuse (*Remember, John the Apostle was a Jew*)
 - The "*Jews*" are used as the foil, the opposition to Jesus in John, unlike in Matthew, Mark and Luke, in which the opposition is the **religious leaders**.
 - The phrase, "*The Jews*," is used **70** times in John
- b. The Gospel of John, however, only presents the opposition as a **caricature**.
- Obviously, many Jews did accept the witness. The first followers of Christ were all **Jews**.
 - There were also many good Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah due to some legitimate concerns about what it meant for one to be the Messiah.
- c. The priests and the Levites come as the representatives of the opposition.
- John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah, a priest, so their interest in him was understandable.
 - John the Baptist would have been considered a **priest**, but they were skeptical of him since he was not towing the party line. (**Story** of the one who always has to be different... that's John)

Vs. 20-21

1. John rejects all of the **accolades** he could have received, and points to Jesus.
- a. I am not the **Messiah**
- There were many **pretenders** to the claim of Messiah ("the anointed one of God.")
 - John rejects this title for himself
- b. I am not **Elijah**
- Some believed that he would return and settle all **disputes** in preparation for Messiah (Malachi 4:5)
 - It is amazing how we can take one small reference and blow it up into something more than is intended (kind of like end our times theologians).
- c. I am not the expected **prophet**.

- Some thought **Isaiah** or **Jeremiah** or some other great prophet would return before the Messiah.
 - This belief is based on the promise made by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15.
 - John the Baptist denied this title, but irony of ironies... that is who he was. He was the final prophet, the greatest of all
2. What we should learn: **Resist** the cultic worship of our faith leaders.
 - a. Notice that John continually rebuffs the attempt by the scribes and Pharisees to make him more central than he ought to be.
 - They were, in essence, testing his **ego**.
 - John was a threat to their **authority**.
 - They were likely relieved to find out how self-deprecating John was.
 - However, warning bells... The true star had yet to be revealed (vs. 26): **Jesus**.
 - b. Any preacher that points anywhere else but to Jesus is a **false witness**.
 - Any preacher who gets **wealthy** proclaiming this witness, is a false witness.
 - Any preacher who gains great **power** from preaching is a false witness.

Vs. 23 So, who is John the Baptist? A voice, pointing to someone else...

1. He is calling us to **straighten** the path for the Lord. (from Isaiah 40:3)
 - a. Roads of those days were simply worn **paths**.
 - b. If one heard the king was coming, the people would make it smooth, cut out the grass, get rid of the rocks.
 - c. John says that he is the one telling us that the king is coming.
 - d. This is often interpreted as something very **personal**: get your act together.
 - But it is about us pulling together so that our **values** and **culture** reflect the one who will be walking amongst us.
 - Christianity is not a “private” faith, but a **communal** one: we are meant to live our lives with and for others.
2. John is **anonymous**. Just a voice. What is important is that the witness be heard.

v. 26 Baptism with **water**

1. The Priests were confused about John’s baptism.
 - a. Baptism was a common practice for **converts** to Judaism, proselytes only
 - John, by baptizing Jews, was saying that everyone needed to be cleansed in preparation to meet Messiah, including and especially the **Jews**
 - Those of us who are religious often believe that we are **special** because we are religious.
 - However, we are no more special than anyone else on the planet
 - The status of their birth as Jews did not make them any different than anyone else.
 - b. Everyone has, within themselves, the **image** of God.
 - This image has been suppressed by our **demeaning** of our humanity.
 - Our job as witnesses is to let people see themselves as God has **created** them

Side note: This is a KEY principle in our world religions unit that we will be doing in January. Being a Christian does not make us any different or any more special to God than the atheist, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim... We all stand equally before God. This is offensive to those who believe that their birth/position/religiosity earns them special favor with God.

- We acknowledge the image of God in ourselves, so we hold up a **mirror** to show others that they, too, have the same image.
- Christians are **hope** and **truth** givers.

This is the witness of John the Apostle: God who wants to crash into our squalid existence and be a part of our lives. This God has marked us and our humanity as holy. We are not repenting of being human, but of using our greatness for destruction, and of suppressing the greatness of others. Our squalid condition is a result of what we have done to ourselves and our world, but it is not a reflection of who we are, and what we are created to be. Jesus has come to restore us to the appropriate relationship with God, and to our rightful place. Humanity is created to be great.