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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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Third Sunday of Advent B – December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

C: AMEN!

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the so-called synoptic gospels, John is portrayed as John the Baptist who precedes Jesus. In the fourth gospel, although John does baptize, “the Baptist” will never be a title you hear for the man, John. John’s role is to witness to Jesus.

The priests and the Levites (the people who were responsible for leading temple worship and maintaining the huge temple compound), sent by the Pharisees, those lay leaders of the congregation who lived to obey every one of the 613 laws of Torah, came out to the wilderness to ask John who he was. They couldn’t get a handle on him, but “all of Jerusalem” was coming to hear him preach and be baptized in the Jordan, so it seemed like something they should check out. They wanted to know if John was on their side or opposed to them, so they’d know how to deal with him.

So the leader of the religious establishment asks, “Who are you?” John answers truthfully, but differently, three times. Trying to be clear about his identity, John answers their question in three ways:

First, he clarifies who he is not: he’s not the Christ, he’s not Elijah, he’s not the prophet Moses. Then he refers to a text of the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament – to disclose his vocation: he is “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” Finally, he admits the limitations of his actions: “I baptize with water” but there is another person who the temple authorities don’t yet know who is far worthier than John is, and he is coming.

In order to witness to Jesus, John has to know who he is not, who he is, and what he does. John’s identity is central to how he is able to bear witness to Jesus, and to what his witness to Jesus’ character means. But the gospel passage we consider today isn’t so much about John as it is about his witness to who Jesus was as divine and human person and to what his public ministry meant. He told anyone who would listen the following:

Jesus is the true light (in John's gospel, light refers to Jesus' [the Word's] ability to create and maintain life).

Jesus is exalted (John is not worthy to untie Jesus' sandal).

Jesus is the Lamb of God (maybe the Passover lamb, a symbol of God's deliverance of the Israelites in their Exodus).

Jesus takes away the world's sin (here, sin is singular, referring not to individual trespasses, but to the world's communal brokenness).

God's Spirit is upon Jesus at his baptism and remains with Jesus.

Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' ministry calls people to live on earth as life is lived in heaven.

Jesus is the Son of God.

In John's gospel, witness is the beginning of faith -- bearing witness to the Word, Jesus Christ is the foundation for the emergence of human faith in God.

This testimony from John is tremendous witness. The temple leaders didn't already know the things that John shared about Jesus. But how could that be? They were the religious establishment of the people of Israel; they were supposed to know about "true light," "sin," "the Son of God," "heaven." Isn't it predictable that those ignorant leaders, faced with embarrassment, either wanted to cover up their ignorance or wanted to discredit John, this strange witness? So they came out to hear more.

Sometimes we can "hear" more by observing someone's behavior than we can from actual words, can't we? When have you experienced and believed someone's witness about God the Father, Son or Holy Spirit? Was the witness spoken – or was it made solely in actions?

Testimony – whether in a courtroom, about an event or a person, or anywhere, about how God works in our lives, is a true, first-person account of an experience. It is the practice of making a public statement about what we have seen, heard, and experienced for ourselves. Anyone in this gathering can participate in giving testimony. And any member of the congregation can discern where one person's personal story overlaps with their own, and with the larger story that applies to the

whole community. And that testimony brings **joy** to us and to our sisters and brothers in Christ as we share it. Not just happiness, but **joy – joy** in the love of God, even in the worst of times; even in the time of COVID-19; **joy** in the hope that salvation brings; **joy** in the peace that the gift of faith brings. Think of the times when you might have witnessed to the love of Jesus in your life. What were the words you used? What were the actions that formed your witness?

But – maybe we’re not sure about what might be our proper witness to Jesus. If so, we might start by focusing on what God is calling us to: what is our vocation, with respect to Jesus? We might use the same method we heard from John the baptizer to help us claim our identity to bear witness to Jesus. For instance, if you want to try out this investigation, how would you complete these statements to focus on your witness:

First, “I am not _____.” Who are you not? The same people who the priests and Levites thought John might be, or some other person or persons?

Second, “this portion of scripture will tell you something about what I do: _____.” Where, in scripture is there a description of how you serve God?

And finally, “If you want to really know what I’m about, you’d have to know that I do this: _____.”
In what ways do you act to carry out God’s call to you to serve?

John bore witness to Jesus. We all have stories to tell about God’s accompaniment in our lives and what that presence in our lives means, whether we feel able to share them or not. We all are called as Christians to preach the gospel – to share the message of God’s love and forgiveness – and telling the stories of how God is working in our lives is a great way to do that declaration.

Let’s pray. Stir up our wills, Lord God, and open our ears to the words of your prophets so that, chosen by your Spirit, we may testify to your light. Lead us on the way; show us how to open ourselves to the needs of our sisters and brothers in every circle of life. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: Amen.**