

For 13 Dec 2020, Third Sunday in Advent

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

Testify!

What has brought you to be part of this congregation? What is your witness?

There have been a number of responses people are making. "My spouse brought me." "We have spent a good deal of our lives in different churches, and this is now time for us to be together." "The liturgy makes me comfortable."

And then there are those that are named as special people who brought others into the congregation – or even the phrase, "I found the people to be so welcoming, I just love the people."

To me it is interesting what is missing from those statements.

This was something that we don't do often in our churches...testify...give witness.

But those are familiar words. You may know them because of other churches, but more likely, you know they because of another setting – a court room.

I was called into court for a trial. A woman had died. She was a member of my congregation, but that was not the major the reason that I was called into court. I was a volunteer EMT, who had answered an emergency call to an accident. She was doing well when we took her to the hospital. Once there, I moved from being her medical care-worker to again being her friend and pastor. While parts of our conversation were confidential in nature, and the point of the testimony (there is that word again) was to establish her clarity of thought, I was asked to recount what I could about our conversation to show her clarity of thought at that time.

That is the place that we are familiar with these words – whether from personal experience or only through watching TV...listen to these words that are key to what happened with John ...testify, witness, testimony – we even have the chief witness break down on the stand and confess. Now he doesn't confess to any great crime, but he is confessing.

Actually, he has four confessions here – three of them saying who he isn't, and one saying who he is. Each of the questions asked is a set up by the other side.

Each of them means a lot more than what it appears like on the surface. And for each of them – those good attorneys asking the questions are just waiting to pounce on the answer.

Are you the messiah? If you really are, then we know that it is time to pick up our weapons and start to fight and die and kill – If you are the messiah, we know that our land will become the most important in the world. If you are messiah, you will bring a revolution for us.

John the Baptizer really to some degree fit the picture that they wanted of a messiah. He would say anything that he thought he should to the authorities. He wasn't afraid of Rome – and seemed almost like a wild man when it came to calling sin what it was – he was never shy about giving his opinion.

We want someone that honest about sin – at least if it doesn't affect us. Not our sins – but others.

A thunderous man – one who told you what you really should and shouldn't do. That is something we would like in a messiah. Then we know where we stand at all times. But they would have tired of him as messiah – and he confessed – that is not who he was.

Well then, a second question – what about Elijah? Here it is almost as if they are transported to some of our “modern” religiosity – what is called New Age. They wanted to see Elijah himself in the flesh.

We know from the Bible that Elijah is one of two people who never died. The ghost of Elijah – or the reincarnation of Elijah – almost sounds like someone that would go on a talk show, doesn't it.

And if you really want a problem with the question and the answer it received – all you have to do is look at Matthew 11, where Jesus tells us that John is the Elijah who was to come.

What about Elijah? To this day, when a Passover meal is celebrated in a Jewish home, they always set a place for the prophet Elijah. Because the prophet Elijah is to come before the coming of the messiah.

But it is surely not speaking of reincarnation – or some form of communication with the dead. These are so soundly condemned in the Bible that the only reason they could even have asked the question is the fact that Elijah didn't die.

But that too was a misunderstanding. This seems like a splitting of hairs by John and the accusers – which is also fitting for the courtroom drama that is taking place on the seashore. John responds that he is not some dead person brought back to life.

What about “the prophet”? Upon hearing the question, you might want to respond, “of course, John was a prophet – so he should have answered that he was that.”

But the question isn't whether or not John is A prophet, but THE prophet. That is a title they were using – one that referred to someone very specific. In the book of Deuteronomy, God promises to Moses that there will be a prophet raised up – one who is very much like a new Moses. This is the prophet that they were asking John about. Are you THAT one? Are you the New Moses?

Though humility may not have been John's strong suit – he didn't consider himself to be at that level either. He was not the replacement for Moses.

Now the good lawyers are frustrated. They know they need to get him to say something quick. He has been causing quite a stir – and they need to know why he thinks he should be allowed to cause all those problems.

And what does he answer with? A quote from Isaiah – one that has been used before to speak about Elijah's voice – the voice of preparation. Not Elijah himself – but the one who is doing the job of an Elijah. That has to take them off guard.

John himself didn't understand the full implication of what he said. Think of how John seemed to react when he found out who he was pointing to – even at the point he was in jail for sending others to follow Jesus – he was still asking who Jesus was – talk about slow on the uptake.

But back to this idea of a trial – and witnesses and testimony. What of yours? If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That is an interesting question.

We can ask that question in another way – if some people were to send questioners to you – like they did for John the Baptizer – what would your answer be, and why would they ask the questions.

Some might ask you the question of your faith if they see that you come to church. But that might not raise a question. We are in Texas after all. The apostle Paul gives some other reasons why the question might be asked – if you try to live by the things that were read today – some might wonder what it is that motivates you.

Giving thanks to God – no matter what is going on in your life – you knowing that God is in control. That might look mighty strange to people.

A dear saint, was looking at her four-year-old son, who has cancer at Temple University hospital in Philadelphia. They are told that his chance of survival is less than 20% -- she breaks down in tears. That is a very normal thing to do.

She was not a strong person – but over the next year, as she cared for the little boy, she practically lived in his hospital room. And then she noticed the change in herself – in her daughter – in her husband – and yes, in her church, she began to give thanks for what God was doing in their lives.

The curse of cancer had opened her eyes to so much – so she gave thanks. She grew into that. She cried about the pain of cancer. She would have taken the place of her son if she could. But she also gave thanks.

Give thanks in all things – I wonder if that would have been easier if life was easier. But it would not be as meaningful. They grew close to the other families in the hospital. Seeing other children die – there were many tears. Matthew survived.

One of his playmates from the cancer ward didn't – and both families were able to thank God. I know that sounds strange – but this is from the conviction that God is in charge.

I think that leads to other people to ask questions.

In your own life – some of you may have that dramatic of a story – or it may be as simple as wanting to learn more about the bible – so you attend a weekly bible study like the one Thursday on the book of Acts, or the time you take to read what feeds your love of Jesus – or – here is an important one – one that is not my great gift – but is for some here...you sit in the presence of God and pray.

And it is your living of your faith that leads people to ask the question of you. The questions are there – even if they don't voice it like those sent to John did.

How do you answer?

Based on how John answered I am going to give four answers as well. These surely aren't the only way to answer the question – but they reflect the attitude that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Why do you live your life in such a way?

It is not because you are holier than others. At least not that you think of yourself as superior – if that is what is meant by holier. Yours is a choice that comes from being a child of God. You are not the messiah – the one to save others. That belongs to another.

You do not claim to be like one of the great teachers of old – perhaps among us we have those with some of those gifts – but I doubt if there is any here who would want to claim to be at the level of an Elijah, or a John the Baptizer. Though I will tell you that Isaiah (not Elijah) and John the Baptizer are two of my favorite people in the Bible.

You might not preach like Paul. Yet, as a simple follower of Jesus, you can tell of the love of Jesus. I think there is a hymn that says something like that.

Why do you live as a follower of Jesus? Not why are you a Lutheran – but simply – why follow Jesus. He is who we follow.

Not because you are great in yourself – only that you claim to have been transformed by God – that through Christ, God is about changing you.

Expect this question from others – not as in a trial – but it will be asked of you – as you follow Jesus. Others do see the evidence in your life that God is at work in you.

And you should be able to say, “This is what I do simply as a follower of Jesus. He is the important one, who is transforming me, and that is finally the answer.”

Amen