

## “An Effective Witness: John the Baptist”

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

Having made it my business as a preacher to acquaint myself with the stories of some of the great witnesses to Christ in church history, I have a few favourite events at which I would like to have been an invisible guest.

I'd like to have been present when **John Knox** stood up against Mary, Queen of Scots. Witnesses said even when the dangers of the Scottish Reformation were past and he was an old man, they'd lift him up into the pulpit and there he'd stand tottering until he was caught up into his message. Then he'd “ding the pulpit into balds” – a Scottish expression meaning, “break up the pulpit” with his preaching. A bit of exaggeration, no doubt, but I'd like to have been there to see it and hear it.

I'd like to have been in Hampton Court the day **Hugh Latimer** preached to Henry VIII in such a way that it offended him. I'd like to have been there the following Sunday when he was commanded by the king to preach again and make an apology. Hugh addressed himself as he began to preach:

Hugh Latimer, do you know before whom you are to speak today? To the high and mighty monarch, the king's most excellent majesty, who can take away your life if you offend him; therefore, take care that you do not speak a word to displease him. But consider this too: do you know from where you have come, and upon whose errand you are sent? Even by the great and mighty God! He is all-present, all-powerful; God sees all your ways, and is able to throw you into hell! Take care, therefore, that you deliver your message faithfully.

He then gave Henry the same sermon he'd preached the week before – only with more passion and energy!

I'd like to have been at the town of Worms on April 18, 1521, when the great Reformer, **Martin Luther** stood against the Roman Catholic powers of his day. There before him were arrayed the bishop-princes and the theologians of the church, and along with them, Charles V, heir of a long line of sovereigns, Lord of Burgundy, Austria, Naples, Spain, and the Low Countries, Holy Roman Emperor. To the questioning of Johann Eck, Archbishop of Trier, his antagonist, Luther answered:

I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise.

I'd also like to have heard the apostle, **Peter**, on the day of Pentecost, or perhaps before the Sanhedrin when he and his buddy, **John**, declared, "Whether it's right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we've seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). What a day that was in the history of the Church!

But if I really stop and think about it, there's one I'd forgo all the others to see and listen to: **John the Baptist**, a bit of a weirdo, true, but an intensely interesting man. I say this for two reasons: first, because Jesus himself said, "among those born of women no one is greater" (Lk. 7:28). And, second, because John was the first herald, the primary witness to our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ.

In Mark's gospel we find that John the Baptist jumps full-blown onto the front page of the story of Christ with a prophetic proclamation carried mostly from the oracles of the prophets, Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1): "See. I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way – the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mk. 1:2-3). John the Baptist's story dominates the first eight verses of this gospel. He is also mentioned extensively in the other three gospels. Why? And why was he so effective? The answer to these questions will provide some remarkable help to our own need and desire to witness.

### 1. **The character of the messenger** (Mk. 1:6).

Some people get hung up with **the get-up of John the Baptist**. But we ought to note that it's his character that really matters. Admittedly, he looked a bit weird. Verse 6 gives us a visual introduction to his character: "John was clothed with [some kind of clothing made of] camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." I suppose he was the ultimate get back to nature kind of guy – what with his natural clothes and natural foods. Mind you, I suppose the anti-fur coalition would've been displeased with him. But John definitely wasn't making a

fashion statement. He didn't care about **Moore's** motto: "well made, well dressed, well-priced." His camel's-hair robe was the kind of garb worn by lots of the very poor, and his belt, unlike the fancy belts so popular in those days, was simply a leather thong. His food wasn't very exciting either. His idea of eating out was to catch a few grasshoppers and a visit to the local beehive in some tree for dessert. It was really pretty basic and paltry stuff.

Actually, **John was in perfect control of his lifestyle.** He knew exactly what he was doing, for he had assumed the dress and style of the ancient prophet, Elijah, the Tishbite (described in 2 Kgs. 1:8) who'd called his people to national repentance in his day and age. John's dress and lifestyle were **a protest** against the godlessness and the self-serving materialism of his times. It amounted to **a call** to separate from the sinful culture evident all around him, to repent and to live a life focused on God and his priorities.

Even **the context** where John chose to live and exercise his ministry – what Mark calls **the "wilderness"** – was meant to highlight his concern and commitment. We may recall it was originally in the "wilderness" of Sinai that the people of Israel savoured their profound escape from Egypt and experienced their amazing re-acquainting encounters with God. Therefore, the people's coming out of the villages and towns to meet John in the "wilderness" country outside of the towns and the capital city was a subtle reminder of Israel's history of disobedience and rebellion, and their desire to begin again in repentance and renewal (William L. Lane, 1975, p. 50, 51).

What was beautiful was that **John's life and actions bore out who he was.**

He committed himself to live **a life of continual repentance and uncompromising devotion to God.** He was fearless in preaching what he believed to be God's message for his day, underscored by the ancient, prophetic garb he wore. For example, he rebuked the Pharisees, the religious right of his day, as well as the Sadducees, the more liberal left, by calling them both "a brood of vipers," and tried to encourage them to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:7, 8). He instructed the common people to get more serious about sharing what they had with others: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none" (Lk. 3:11). As for the tax collectors who preyed upon the poor and rich alike he warned them to be fair (Lk. 3:13). And he told the soldiers to be content with their wages and not to act high-handedly (Lk. 3:14). John was as **fearless** as he looked!

He was also, in keeping with his attire, **self-forgetting and humble**. Later, when Jesus' star began to rise and John the Baptist's own ministry was being eclipsed, his disciples came to him in alarm. His response was impeccably magnanimous: "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven." "... I am not the Messiah" (Jn. 3:27, 28a). John saw himself as the friend of a bridegroom, immensely glad in his friend's achievements. He concluded his appraisal of Jesus Christ and his ministry, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:29, 30). John the Baptist was a man of sublime downward mobility just as his apparel suggested.

My point is this: the reason John the Baptist was such an effective witness is that **he embodied his message!**

In his 1877 Yale University Lectures on Preaching, **Phillips Brooks**, the author of the gently winsome Christmas carol, "O little town of Bethlehem," gave this foundational definition of preaching:

Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come through the person, not merely over his lips.... It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him (1899, p. 9).

Today we call that **congruence and authenticity**. That's what people look for and want to see. Unfortunately, it's not always there. And this applies not only to a preacher, but also to politicians, anyone in the public eye and anyone who want to serve others and give some credible witness to a power greater than themselves.

That was precisely the case with John the Baptist. Although he might have looked a bit weird, he was a man you could believe and trust. Canadian **Marshal McLuhan** used to say, "The medium is the message." In this sense John the Baptist was his message. He was filled with the Holy Spirit right from the very beginning, even when he was yet in his mother Elizabeth's womb (Lk. 1:41). He kept the sacred vows that had been made for him before his birth (Lk. 1:14-17). Others could have said the same things he did, but to not to the same avail. The fact his words saturated his own being and dominated his life – the fact that they were true in him – gave him immense authority and power. People listened to him and were changed by his message.

The same is true of us. Nothing will make our words penetrate more than that which is true in us and comes from the heart in total sincerity. If we want to have more effect on others, we must humbly ask God to make our lives more accurate demonstrations of the truth of our witness and message.

## 2. **The nature of his message** (Mk. 1:4-8).

What was John the Baptist's message? To begin with, it was **a message of "baptism," of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins"** (1:4b).

Apart from whatever you and I may think of baptism – say, as to when and how one ought to do it – **John's baptism was totally radical**. NT scholar, **William Lane** says this baptism was wholly novel. No one else had ever done it for this reason (p. 49). The only thing that came close to it at the time was the fact that Gentile converts to Judaism were baptized. However, that baptism was a ritual washing from all the defilements of belonging to another culture and another creed. Apart from the Essenes, who practiced regular ritual baptisms for the impurities and sins they'd accumulated, Jews were now being asked to do something they'd never done before. Jews were being baptized; it was unheard of! This is why John was called "the baptizer" (1:4a). There'd never been anyone like him.

The second thing to notice is that the baptism focused upon **repentance from sin**. Again **the "wilderness" location** where John preached and practiced his baptism was calculated because the biblical concept of repentance from sin was deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition. The Jews who came to John knew why they were coming out to the wilderness. When they came, John first sat them all down, and then he preached about their sin. Imagine the scene: scores, and later, perhaps hundreds, at the height of John's ministry, seated and standing along the Jordan River, listening as he excoriated them, warning of judgment, speaking to individual sins, naming names, calling for social justice and repentance. Finally, when they were duly convicted, they formed endless lines, waiting to be baptized as a sign that they'd repented and were prepared to turn their lives right around.

What a gift John gave to them by preaching on **sin and judgment!** It's a **neglected gift** in our own day of a health-and-wealth prosperity gospel, or some feel-good therapeutic gospel. It's also a **neglected gift** in our own day of mere grudging acceptance of and concessions to responsibility.

When men and women and young people are awakened to the facts of their own short-comings and sin and ultimate judgment, they become eager listeners to the **good news of the gospel** of the Saviour who brings forgiveness, restoration and healing. And there is **grace** in such preaching because the gift of forgiveness is paid for by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This is **an Advent truth**: the divine and proper preparation for the gospel of Jesus Christ is preaching about sin. That's why in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Those who mourn over their sin will see their need for a Saviour, and thus find themselves in a place to receive and be blessed by God's grace.

The baptism of repentance for sin was the first part of John's message, but the second spoke of **a superior, ultimate baptism**: "[John the Baptist] proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit'" (1:7-8).

He told them, he'd drenched them with water which was only external, but One would come who would drench them in the Holy Spirit, which was intrinsically internal. What a beautiful metaphor for the Holy Spirit! When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, Christ permeates every part of us, as much as our blood may course through every artery, vein and capillary. This is the baptism that really matters. If you do not know Christ you are still in your sins. The Spirit's baptism is the answer. When he drenches your life with his, you are changed forever.

**John's message was perfectly balanced**: it contained both law and gospel. God's law holds us to account and calls for repentance. But repentance alone cannot save us. There must be the gospel of the gift of God's grace and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And then God's law will show us some good ways in which we can respond and live.

**Why was John's witness so effective?** First, because his character modelled his message. Therefore what he said had "the ring of crystalline truth." Second, his message was complete. It spoke of both law and grace, prefiguring Jesus Christ's own "grace and truth" (Jn. 14).

### 3. **The delivery of his message** (Mk. 1:5).

There's a third thing I note in passing before I conclude. John the Baptist's witness was also made effective by **his passion**. When he stood before his audience in the wasteland -- Elijah-like, gaunt and solitary, yet powerfully alive -- he was heard to be **preaching with fire**. We can be sure that like the prophets of old, he was impassioned, and occasionally close to tears. At first hearing, you might have thought that **he was angry** -- perhaps he had a right to be; after all, there are things that should cause our righteous anger to rise -- but there was also **something gentle and compelling about him**. Verse 5 says, "And the people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people from Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (1:5). How many hundreds or even thousands there were, I guess we'll never know. But there were many who came and responded to him and his message. A few verses later, we discover that even the Lord Jesus Christ came, also, to be baptized by him (1:9-11).

**Karl Barth**, the greatest Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, perhaps the greatest Protestant theologian since John Calvin, kept a small reproduction of the early sixteenth-century **Isenheim Altarpiece**, a monumental masterwork of **Mathias Grunewald**, depicting John the Baptist, with an open Bible in one hand and pointing to Jesus Christ on the cross with the other, on the wall facing his desk. It was to remind him of his own task and of the greatest witness that has ever been made to Christ.

John's **life**, John's **message**, and John's **passion** made him the greatest witness in history. He'd prepared the way for the Lord! God was pleased with his ministry, so he confirmed it, crowning his witness with the greatest of all honours -- the baptism of Christ.

May our witness to our Saviour and Lord be half as effective!

Amen

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