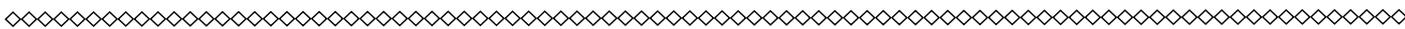




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Sermon Brief
Text: John 1:6-9, 15
Title: Christmas as Love
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Tomorrow Sankt Nikolaus comes! Children, do you have your shoes cleaned up yet? You know the tradition here in Catholic oriented western Germany. I have about concluded that kids in Germany have been exceeding clever. With St. Nikolaus coming on the first Monday of December and then Weihnachtsmann coming on Dec. 24, children in Germany have managed to get two days of gift giving. That's not a bad deal for kids! Perhaps, the parents would have a different idea.

But *Adventus* means 'coming' and instead focuses on the coming of Jesus into this world. St. Nikolaus and the Weihnachtsmann both have extensive 'press agents' who announce their coming to everyone possible. For several weeks now, one can't pick up a newspaper or turn on a TV without someone reminding us that these two days of gift giving are rapidly approaching and that we parents had better get busy getting the right gifts for these two gentlemen to leave for the kids. I've also noticed a clever advertising approach by some businesses, especially in the computer tech world, this year. By adopting the Adventskalender structure, each day on the calendar brings a new sales pitch as a Türchen to be opened with a different set of products.

Jesus had his 'press agent' also, although not as 'slick' and 'smooth' as those of St. Nikolaus and the Weihnachtsmann in our time. He was called John the Baptist,¹ and John 1:6-8 describes his mission to announce the coming of Jesus into this world.² Hear the fourth gospel writer's depiction:

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.³

As the literary structural analysis of the gospel prologue in vv. 1-18 stresses, verses 6-8 stress John's witness to the world, and verse 15 stresses his witness to the believing community.⁴ In the Advent Lectionary Year A calendar, the emphasis on the second Sunday of Advent falls on John the Baptist. Thus we direct our attention to John today. John played a critically important role in announcing the coming of the long awaited Messiah.⁵ He preached a powerful message about Jesus and the impact He coming would have.⁶ His message

¹["Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων]. A prophet of priestly descent, whose mother, Elizabeth, was related to Mary the mother of Jesus. John lived in Judea and had close contacts with the wilderness, where he began his public ministry by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Multitudes came to be baptized by John in the River Jordan, among them Jesus himself. Later John was arrested, imprisoned, and finally executed by Herod Antipas. The disciples of John formed a "Baptist" community, which continued to exist long after his death. (The term "Baptist" will be used in this special sense throughout this article.) Apparently the community produced a literature of its own. Fragments of Baptist literature are preserved in the Synoptic gospel tradition." [W.R. Farmer, "John The Baptist," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach]

²Different gospel accounts focus on this mission differently. See. Matt. 3:1-12; Mark. 1:1-8; Luke 1-9, 15-17; John 1:19-28 for details.

³GNT: 1.6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· 1.7 οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. 1.8 οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. 1.9 Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 1.10 ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω.

⁴Jhn. 1:15, John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me'" (Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων, Οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον, Ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν.).

⁵Mark 1:2-3, NRSV: 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," "

⁶Mk. 1:7-8, NRSV: 7 He 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. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Mt. 3:7-12, NRSV: 7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise

centered on repentance as essential for one to prepare for the coming of God's Messiah. Stern warnings about the coming wrath of God upon unrepentant sinners is a major theme of John's message.

The theme emphasis for this second Sunday of Advent is love. At first glance, connecting love and John the Baptist doesn't seem easy or natural from the available biblical texts. From Luke 3:18, (So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people"), we catch a quick glimpse into the nature of John's preaching to the crowds of people. Luke summarizes John's preaching as "proclaiming the good news" (Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἕτερα παρακαλῶν εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν) to the people. John's message with its sternness and bluntness was 'good news' to the people, according to Luke. The theme of divine love for today includes the point that God loves sinful humanity. He is, without question, a God of justice and righteousness. And this means judgment, possible harsh judgment and punishment of wrong-doing. But even His wrath is grounded in His love, as Rev. 3:19 declares: "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent."

We celebrate the love of God today through the ministry of John the Baptist. The same Jesus who declared (Jhn 3:16), "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" also in that very same speech said (v. 18), "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Love calls for disciplined commitment and devotion to God. This is the very nature of divine love.

As the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist challenges us at two points from our text in John 1:6-8.

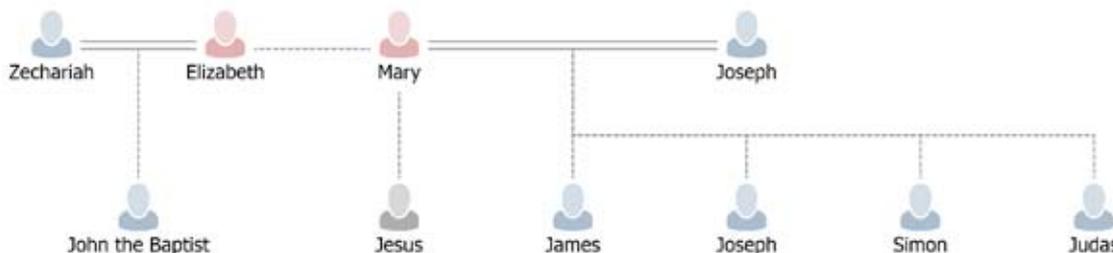
BODY

I. God sent a witness to the Light, vv. 6-7

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

1.6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· 1.7 οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ.

The Synoptic Depiction of John. The heart of the mission given to John by God was for him to be a witness to the coming light. The text simply declares that John was "sent from God." Luke in his gospel account (1:5-25, 57-80) provides greater detail about how all this worked. Elizabeth and Zechariah, a priest in the Jerusalem temple, although beyond normal child-bearing years, were promised a son by an angel of the Lord. They lived in Bethlehem in the southern province not too far from Jerusalem. After Elizabeth became pregnant with John, the angel of God made his announcement to Mary in Nazareth in the northern province of Galilee of the coming of Jesus. Mary then traveled south to Bethlehem to visit her cousin Elizabeth and spent three months with her in Bethlehem until



up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.";

Lk. 3:7-18, NRSV: 7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." 15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

shortly before the birth of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah. In Luke 1:57-80 the naming of the baby John is recorded by Luke. Because Zechariah had been somewhat skeptical when the angel first announced to him while in the Jerusalem temple that he was going to have a son, Zechariah had not been able to talk audibly. So with the baby was eight days old and the time came for circumcision, friends and relatives assumed that the baby would be named after his father, but Elizabeth insisted that his name was to be John instead. When they asked Zechariah about this, he wrote out the name John on a tablet to indicate the baby's name. To the amazement of all the people, Zechariah received his speech back and was able to audibly speak praises to God for all His blessings. News of this very unusual circumstance spread "throughout the hill country of Judea" around Bethlehem. Zechariah then spoke praises to God with the prediction that this child would be mightily used to God to prepare the way for promised Messiah (Lk. 1:67-79). Luke then concludes by simply declaring, "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel" (Lk. 1:80).

The Fourth Gospel depiction of John. The fourth gospel writer covers all these years and events with his short declaration that John was sent from God. What a powerful proclamation! Although it took some thirty years or so in God's plan, the divine commissioning by God guided these events in the life of John in order to prepare him for his life's work. Godly parents played a major role in John's being chosen by God for this mission. Their dedication to God was important, and they then shaped the training and education of this young boy out of their understanding of God's will and leadership.

What a blessing! To be called by God into God's service is a holy calling and a high blessing. God called me to gospel ministry over fifty years ago in part as the answer to the prayers of a godly grandmother who asked God to choose one of her children for vocational ministry to the Lord. God chose to answer her prayer by calling a grandson instead. And Granny Brannan was grateful for how God answered her prayer, even though it was in a very different way that she had anticipated.

Parents, I want to challenge you today with the example of John the Baptist. How willing are you to ask God to use one of your children in vocational ministry? Have you ever asked God to make your child a minister of the Gospel? That's one of the greatest blessings you as a parent can experience.

At minimal the birth of John challenges us as parents to dedicate our children to God and to ask God to bless both them and us so the children will grow up to live a godly life of devotion to God.

John's Ministry. According to our text, John was sent by God to be a witness. That is, John was to share with the Jewish people the good news of the coming of the long awaited Messiah. From the close of the Old Testament era over four centuries earlier, no prophet had arisen among the Israelite people. God had not spoken a fresh word to them for over four hundred years. The Jewish people had endured many hardships and suffered heavily under foreign domination first by the Babylonians, then by the Greeks and by Jesus' day by the Romans. They longed for God to deliver them from these tyrannical foreign powers.

Now in God's timing John was sent to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the divinely anointed Deliverer. In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke the emphasis is upon John as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies from Malachi and Isaiah:⁷

Mark 1:2-3 (NRSV): As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' "

Matthew 1:3 (NRSV): This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "

Luke 3:4-6 (NRSV): as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

John was to be the 'forerunner' of the Messiah who was to get the people ready for the coming of the Messiah. As the Synoptic Gospel writers uniformly stress, it was to be through John's preaching of repentance and baptism as the public expression of repentance that was the way John fulfilled his role as forerunner.⁸

⁷To be precisely accurate, one has to understand that part of the Synoptic quote comes from Malachi and part comes from Isaiah, rather than all of it coming from Isaiah as a surface reading of the gospel texts would suggest:

Malachi 3:1, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"

Isaiah 40:3, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

⁸Note the following texts:

Mark 1:4 (NRSV): "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Matthew 3:1-2 (NRSV): "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

Preparation for the Messiah was to be a spiritual cleaning up of the lives of the people.

The fourth gospel takes a different perspective to describe essentially the same perspective. John was to bear witness to Jesus as the Light of God. John's role was as a witness testifying to what God had told him and what he had experience personally. The ultimate objective of John's work as a witness was "so that all might believe through him" (ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ). John's ministry was to help the people come to faith commitment to Jesus as the salvational Light of God.

Here is an important lesson for us. Although the mission given by God to John was unique and applied exclusively to John in most of its aspects, some application does spill over to us as disciples today. We are called upon to be witnesses to Jesus as God's Light to a lost, sin darkened world. Jesus later on would make this abundantly clear as he said to the disciples just prior to His ascension back to Heaven (Acts 1:8, NRSV):

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

During this Christmas season, may we follow the example of John and be a faithful witness to the coming of Jesus as the Light of the world.

II. The witness remained a witness, vv. 8-9, 15

8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

1.8 οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. 1.9 Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 1.10 ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω.

15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

1.15 Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων, Οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον, Ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν.

The second emphasis of our text focuses on John's relationship to Jesus. From the Synoptic Gospels we learn that John and Jesus were cousins, since their mothers were first cousins. John was born a few months before Jesus, and thus was slightly older than Jesus. According to the customs of that day, John then should have been ahead of Jesus and Jesus would have been expected to show deference to John as the older cousin. But the fourth gospel emphatically makes the point in verses eight and fifteen that this was not the case. And the Synoptic Gospel writers also take pains to make the same point.⁹

In Jhn. 1:8, the gospel writer makes the point of John's relation to Jesus in connection to his ministry to the world in general: John was not the light himself. Rather he was a witness to the light.¹⁰

In Jhn 1:15, the gospel writer makes the point of John's relation to Jesus in connection to his ministry to the believing community. John, although older, ranks under Jesus who is far superior as the divine Light of God to the lost world.

Both text make the point of John's humility before Jesus. The fourth gospel goes on to stress this attitude of John throughout his ministry:

John 1:24-27 (NRSV): 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

John 1:35-36 (NRSV): 35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he

Luke 3:3 (NRSV): "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,"

⁹Note the following texts:

Mark 1:7-8 (NRSV): "He 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.'"

Matthew 3:11 (NRSV): "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Luke 3:15-17 (NRSV): "As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

¹⁰For the background to this see the Literary Structural Outline of the Prologue of John at Cranfordville.com.

watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

John 3:25-28 (NRSV): 25 Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew. 26 They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” 27 John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’

John 5:32-36 (NRSV): 32 There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. 33 You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 But I have a testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.

John 10:40-42 (NRSV): 40 He [Jesus] went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. 41 Many came to him, and they were saying, “John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” 42 And many believed in him there.

A huge lesson applies to us today from this emphasis in the text. No matter how important we may think we are in the ministry of the church, we are never ever indispensable. We are effective witnesses to Jesus only as we demonstrate the same humility as John did. Repeatedly John declared that he was not worthy even to untie the strap of the sandals of Jesus, a task reserved for the lowliest of slaves in the ancient world. John knew his role was secondary, not primary.

Boy, we need to always keep this same attitude as a guiding principle of our ministry and witness. Advent this year with the emphasis on John today challenges us to remind ourselves of our role in ministry and service to God. Humility is a critically important virtue for believers. Egotism and arrogance are utterly out of place in the believer’s life.¹¹ And especially this time of the year with the focus on the coming of Jesus into this world.

CONCLUSION

Advent. Coming. Jesus is coming! He is bringing God’s saving light to all humanity. John helped prepare the way for His coming. And so are we! What are you doing to help others get ready for Jesus?

¹¹See 1 John 2:15-17 where arrogance is condemned as reflecting worldly values: “15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; 16 for all that is in the world — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, *the pride in riches* [ἡ ἀλαζονεία] — comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.” (NRSV)