

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:6-9)

Why did John Come?

I watch way too much TV. The other night, I saw an episode of *The Goldbergs*, a sitcom set in the 80's. In this particular episode the mom was teaching a home economics class at the local high school. She failed the whole football team because they just couldn't cook. The principal came in to tell her that her class was supposed to be an easy A. While they were arguing, the football coach joined in. The mom asked what he was even doing there. They proceeded to argue about whether home-ec or gym class is more worthless. What was that football coach doing there? Why did he jump in? The mom's reaction to his jumping in on their private conversation might just tune us in to how the Jewish leaders were feeling when John the Baptist appeared – minus the comedy of course. For them, this was no joking matter. They sent priests and Levites down to the Jordan River to make him explain himself. Their question is very important. **Why did John come?**

I.

Why do you think the Jewish leaders cared so much about this question? Remember what was happening. John was baptizing in the Jordan River and the city of Jerusalem was emptied by people stampeding out to hear him preach and be baptized. Jerusalem is built on the top of a ridge and the Jordan River is way down at the bottom. They didn't have cars. They didn't have ski lifts. Most of the city dwellers probably didn't even have horses. Most people had to walk down to see him knowing that they were going to have to trudge back up that hill again. Today, consultants who try to help churches with their outreach programs talk about their natural areas of outreach. They warn them that it wouldn't make sense for a church like ours to go downtown and invite people to drive all the way out here on Sunday morning. Most of the time, they'd be right. But all that distance didn't keep the people away from John.

The leaders of the Jews were worried. They certainly didn't move people like that. They were worried that this was going to cost them their position. But at the same time, they did have an obligation to know what was going on. If there was some kind of false prophet down there, it was their job to do something about it. So they sent trained men down to interrogate John. And they found his answers difficult and confusing. I doubt those messengers went back up to Jerusalem much clearer on who he was or why he had come. But he did tell them. He was the voice crying in the wilderness that Isaiah had predicted. Or as the Holy Spirit led the other John to write, **“He came as a witness to testify concerning that light.”**

John the Baptist was a man sent from God. He was no threat to Jewish worship and faith because the author of that faith sent him to announce the fulfillment of all that they had been waiting for. He was there to testify to the light. What is “the light?” Of course, it's Jesus, right? Why does God use that image of light for Christ? Because without the light, you're stuck in darkness. I fear sometimes that today, we're losing the power of that image because it's so rare for us to be truly in the dark. Several times on vacation, we've taken our kids to see caves. One of the things they always do when you're touring a cave is turn off the lights so you can see how dark it really is. You cannot see anything. They always warn you not to wander away from the group because those caves go on for miles and miles. It's pitch black. You'll wander around down there until you drop from exhaustion and die.

That's the situation we were all born into spiritually. We were all lost in a world without light, wandering, groping, trying to find God but doomed to never even get a glimpse of him. So God sent Jesus into this world to be the Light, the one who chases the darkness away so that we can walk with God. He sent John, not to be the Light, but to be a witness of the Light. If you ever get lost in one of those caves and wander for days without food or water, stumbling through the darkness, the best thing that could ever happen to you would be to have a rescue worker with a flashlight and a guide rope back to the light find you. That's what God sent John to be.

What is the darkness that we were lost in? It isn't just ignorance. It's sin, our sin and the sin of every other human being who has ever lived. It's sin that we were born with. You don't have to teach children to be

selfish. You have to teach them to share. You don't have to teach them to challenge you. You have to teach them to obey you and to respect others. While other children can give them ideas about sin that they never had, they think of plenty of good ideas about how to sin all on their own. Ask any mom: how do you feel when you realize that you're children have become very quiet? Doesn't it worry you just a little bit? Don't you go see what kind of trouble they're getting into? Why? Because they're sinners, born in spiritual darkness, just like the rest of us.

But Jesus came to be the Light who sets us free. He lived a life that had no darkness at all. He had no sin in his heart so he never committed any sin. Then he laid down his life and died for all the darkness that covers all of our hearts and all hearts of every human being who will ever be born. Then he rose to drive that darkness away. He rose to give us life and light with him for all eternity. How does he give us that light and that life? Through the gospel message. He sends people like John to testify about Christ. Then he works through that message and he gives us faith in him. That's why God called me and all our teachers and every pastor or Lutheran teacher who has ever served you: to proclaim that message so he could give and feed your faith. **Why did John come? God sent him to testify about Christ.**

II.

John didn't actually come to talk to the leaders of the Jewish people. If he had wanted to do that, he would've gone to the temple in Jerusalem. He came to talk to the people. God isn't actually all that interested in elites, at least not for their position on power. He's interested in people at every level of society. He loves us all and he wants us all to live with him forever. So John came to a place where everyone in Jerusalem could come if they wanted to. He baptized beggar and leader alike.

But even that doesn't give us the full scope of John's ministry. The Apostle John says, **"He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe."** Just to avoid any confusion, the Greek does not actually have the word "men" here. It says simply, "so that everyone might believe." God doesn't care much about our gender either. John came so that every single one of us, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, every person of every race, would believe in Jesus. That was God's goal in sending John.

But how was John supposed to accomplish that? Even if we leave aside the fact that he only lived a year or two after Jesus started his ministry, as far as we know, John never even spoke to a Gentile. We only see him reaching out to the Jewish people, and really only for a very short time. Then King Herod threw him in prison for daring to call his adultery sin. Then he chopped off his head. So did John fail? Was God's purpose thwarted by evil? No. I admit, it looks that way to us and I'm sure it looked a lot worse to those disciples who came and buried his body. And even today, we can wonder why God would let such a great preacher be snuffed out so early in his career. And God doesn't answer that question.

But he does tell us that John came so that all people might hear his testimony and believe. John the Baptist was one of the most famous people who ever lived because he was such a striking character in the life of Christ. Theologians like to call him "the forerunner" which is a big scary theological word for the prophet God sent to announce that Jesus was here. God recorded his message for us. God recorded the voice crying in the wilderness calling his people to repent. God recorded John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River and witnessing the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. God recorded his last question in prison about whether Jesus really was the Christ and how our Lord pointed to all the wonderful works he was doing to reassure this man. God gave us all that so that we can hear his testimony today. Everywhere the gospel has gone, John's work has been taught. Countless Christians have been comforted and strengthened and amazed by his story.

Yet, there's more. John the Baptist was a link in the chain that runs from the time of Christ until today. He was one of countless people God has sent to grab sinners who were still lost in the cave and lead them by the hand to Jesus. God still sends people to do that. Some of them are guys like me who stand up in front and preach or who travel to new cities and countries to share the gospel. But we are just links in the chain, too. And so are you. The truth is, there are lots more links like you than there are links like me. And God calls you to lead people to the Light.

How do you do that? One of the most natural ways is by bringing your own children to Jesus. Every baby baptized here is a soul that was in darkness and now lives in the light of the Lord. Every day they spend in our preschool or elementary school or Sunday school or high school is a day when they're taught to see the Light of Christ. You bring them here. You bring them to that Light when you read the Bible to them at home

and speak to them about your faith and show them that being here matters to you. But there's more that you can do. Jesus told us all to let our light shine in the darkness so that men would see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. It isn't just my job to reach out with the gospel. It's your job. You do that by supporting our congregation's efforts with your prayers and with your offerings. But you also do that by being Christians who know the gospel and who can talk about the gospel. You do that by growing in your faith and being ready to give an answer for the hope that you have. My friends, God calls us all to grab people by the hand and lead them to the Light. And you can do that job! The Holy Spirit is working in you!

In the last few months, I've been thinking a lot about where our congregation is going. I hope that we can start to have some conversations about that. I want to hear from you. I want us all to hear each other. It bothers me that our church attendance is down. It bothers me that our membership is down. But someone reminded me recently that God didn't call me here to build an institution. God didn't call me here to leave a monument to myself or to organize a group that will be able to pay me well or to make our numbers look good. God called me to preach the gospel. God called me to show you the Light. And God called you for the same reasons. We aren't here to build up Peace Lutheran Church, as much as we love and care about that organization. We're here to hear the gospel and to grow in faith and to share the gospel with the people in Livonia and Westland and Garden City – our natural backyard. And we're here to send the gospel out into all the world. God calls us to live in the Light and to reflect his Light with our words and actions, with our confession in a godless society and with our testimony to his love. We are part of why he sent John. **Why did John come? God sent him because he wants all people to be saved.**

Will that happen? Sadly, no. Jesus did pay for all the sins of all the world. But if you don't trust that, then you will demand that God judge you based on you being a good person. That can only end in hell. But God never wants to send anyone to hell. He wants every person to know their Savior. He gave us the gospel – his power – to make that happen. John shows us the way. It's pointing to Christ, the true Light that was coming into the world. Jesus gives us life and light. May we reflect that life and light throughout the world. Amen.