

## Not An Impersonator!

3<sup>rd</sup> Sun. in Advent – 12/17/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 20, “[John] confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

But said in v. 23, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

### Introduction

✘ Have any of you ever been to see the *Hollywood Walk of Fame* in California? I’ve never seen it in person; that iconic sidewalk which holds – as of this fall with the most recent additions – 2,767 pink stars framed with black granite and the names of famous actors, singers, and other big names in show business.

→ As I understand it, one of the interesting things you will see as you walk over and among all of those stars is at least some of those important and famous people walking right next to you. For example, I read of a family who visited recently where Elvis Presley actually came up and talked with the mom and Marilyn Monroe was just hanging out by her star, only a few steps away from Superman and two Spider-Men!

→ I’m sure you realized that they were all impersonators! Those people were not, of course, the real thing; only pretenders! Though I’m sure they wanted to be what they really were not!

✘ As we continue our walk through the season of Advent, on our way to Bethlehem, we see, here in our Gospel Reading, a famous man suddenly appear on the scene. It’s John the Baptizer – some would say a bit of a strange man, but he was the real McCoy.

→ John most definitely wants all of those in his day and all of us here today to know that he is not an impersonator, but a true witness of the Christ!

### I. John Refused to Impersonate Jesus

✘ As we see in verse 19, the leading Jews of Jerusalem wanted to know who that strange man was. And John was a strange man indeed. The Gospel of Mark tells us that he wore clothing made of camel’s hair; wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey (Mk. 1:6)! Besides that, John stayed out in the wilderness and preached repentance! “Make straight the way of the Lord” (v. 23). John was so unique; so outside of the norm that the priests and Levites took the extra effort to venture outside of Jerusalem to meet this strange but popular preacher. In fact, they were on a mission from those who sent them. Their task was to find out who John was.

→ Though they asked John point blank, “Who are you?” (v. 19), they weren’t really interested in the obvious facts like his name, his parents or where he came from. They wanted to know John’s purpose; who had sent him and where he supposed he got his authority to preach. Apparently John understood their goal, because he answered them plain and clear in verse 20, “I am not the Christ.” But that wasn’t good enough for these investigators. They kept asking; “What then? Are you Elijah?” John said, “I am not!” Next question, “Are you the Prophet?” Now, it’s very important to note that they asked if John is “the Prophet” not just “a” prophet, because the Jews knew God’s promise in Deuteronomy 18:15, where Yahweh promised Moses that the Messiah would be raised up as a prophet “like Moses” in whose mouth God would place His words. This specific prophet came to be known as “the Prophet”. So they were asking John

again if he was the promised Messiah. And John's answer was as direct as possible. He simply said, "No!" (v. 21).

- ✘ He was humble, yet clear and bold. John had no desire to be the king of the hill; no interest in being the center of attention, which set John apart even more, because if there's one thing we human beings are good at, it's trying to be the king of the hill. We love to be the center of attention. Like all the impersonators at the Hollywood Walk of Fame – even when we say it isn't so – we want people to notice us. We like to have people like us! And so it is our sinful nature that pushes us to be on top. Often it doesn't matter the price; we want to be number one!
  - ➔ Even Jesus' disciples had this same problem. One day, Jesus caught them arguing about who was the greatest among them (Mk. 9:34). So Jesus told them that in the world you will find people doing that, but it mustn't be that way among you. In fact He told them, "whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (see Mt. 20:26–27).
  - ➔ That was John. He knew exactly who he was and what God's role for him was to be. "I am not the Christ. ... He [is the one] who comes after me, ... the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (vv. 20, 27).
- ✘ John did not want to be what he was not! He was not an impersonator! He was not a pretender like the people you can meet along the Walk of Fame in Hollywood.

## II. John was a Witness Point to Jesus

- ✘ Even as the priests and Levites were on a mission, John had a mission as well...from God Himself!
  - ➔ It had been determined even before his birth. John's father, the elderly priest Zechariah, and his mom, Elizabeth, had given up their dream of having a child. Elizabeth was barren, and both of them were too old to have children. At least that's what they thought! But, God had other plans.
  - ➔ Being a priest, Zechariah was working in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him, saying, "Your wife...will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." But the angel shared even more about their son's role and mission: "He will be great before the Lord...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk. 1:13, 15).
- ✘ Today's text tells us in verse 6 that John "was a man sent from God." And according to verses 7-8 he had one purpose: to be a "witness." This word, "μαρτυρία" in the original Greek, appears three times in our text! It's a legal term that refers to one who "gives testimony" before a judge. And in this case it addresses John's God-given purpose which is to give a public testimony about the truth of Christianity; in particular testifying to the divinity of Jesus in order to establish the fact that Jesus is both God and the promised Messiah.
  - ➔ John did not come to speak about himself but about someone else. He was happy being what he was. Only a witness! In fact he says in verse 23, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...". As we heard in Isaiah, chapter 40 last Sunday, John's message from God is to be a voice calling people to repentance: "Make straight the way of the Lord" (v. 23).
  - ➔ Then when Jesus came, John was humble enough to say, "He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less." Or, as the translation in our bulletins today says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30).
- ✘ There is an interesting painting displayed at the Unterlin-den Museum at Colmar, Alsace, in France. It's called the Isenheim Altarpiece. And it's a beautiful piece of art, painted by Matthias Grünewald, depicting the crucifixion.

- At the center, you see Jesus on the cross. Mary, Jesus' mother, is shown on the ground at Jesus' right, collapsing in agony in the arms of John, the beloved disciple of Jesus. Next to Mary is Mary Magdalene, praying on her knees. However, at Christ's left, Grünewald painted someone who is out of place; someone who historically couldn't possibly be at the cross: John the Baptizer, with a lamb at his feet.
- Remember John was beheaded by King Herod during Jesus' ministry so he couldn't be a physical witness to Jesus' death. Yet he is there in the painting. And right next to his right shoulder Grünewald wrote the Latin words, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). And one more thing: John is painted with a large index finger pointing directly to Christ on the cross.
- ✘ Although John is historically out of place in that painting, from a theological point of view, he is standing exactly in the right place; his index finger leaving no doubts as to why he belongs there. Verses 7-8 explain to us that John came to bear witness about the "Light of the world" (Jn. 8:12) – who is Jesus, so "that all might believe (in Jesus) through him" (Jn. 1:7–8).
  - It's as if John was sent to be God the Father's flesh and blood index finger pointing every single soul on earth to see and know Jesus; the one John called "the Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29), because it was and is all about Jesus! And this moment in history – the crucifixion is really the moment John was pointing to in every message that he proclaimed. It was all about Jesus and Him crucified at the time John proclaimed it, and it is still all about Jesus and His cross now today!
- ✘ John was not an impersonator; he didn't pretend to be what he wasn't! His finger never pointed to himself, but instead, as he saw Jesus coming toward him one day, John pointed to Jesus and declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29).
  - Imagine that you and I actually went out into the wilderness to see this strange preacher for ourselves. And when we come to John he asks, "Did you come to see me? Well, let me tell you whom you really need to see: not me, but Jesus; the Christ; the Lamb of God! It's all about Him! He's the one – not me – who brings light into your broken, sin-darkened lives. And He not only brings light, but He brings you life and salvation! In fact, one day soon He will suffer and die on a cross to forgive your sins. Focus your attention people on Jesus, not on me!"
- ✘ In that message; that directing of our attention on Jesus, and not John, John the Baptizer shows that he is an Advent man. He came as a witness. He came to prepare the way in our hearts and minds for Jesus to come. But John made sure that he didn't stay in anybody's way. With his testimony, he directed people to Christ, so that by believing in Jesus, all people might have eternal life and salvation. This is Good News; the most joyful news ever!

### III. We are NOT Impersonators, but "A Voice"

- ✘ When you and I think about John and his role – being a witness, directing people to Jesus – I think it's helpful for each of us to wonder: Who was like John in my life? Who directed me to Christ? Who pointed me to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"?
  - Maybe it was your mother, your father, a family member, your teacher, a neighbor, a friend, or a coworker. Someone that didn't want to be at the center, but instead pointed to the center; directing you to Jesus! If that person is still alive friends, I want to encourage you to send that person a Christmas card and thank him/her for being a witness; for being God's voice for you!
- ✘ And I know that God wants every one of us here today to be an Advent person, much like John the Baptizer was an Advent man. Because yes, you have a God-given role too, dear Christian!

He has placed you here to be a John the Baptizer to someone else? No, I'm not asking you to be an impersonator, someone who you are not! But God is asking you to be who you really are – a baptized and redeemed child of God, directing others to Christ! Testifying for Jesus and sharing accurately all that He has done, and continues to do for you!

➔ Be a voice out there in the world; a voice that speaks God's Word of truth; a voice that calls to repentance and trusts in the One who is coming. Stick out your big index finger and point others to Christ!

➔ Make sure everyone around you knows that it is not about you, but about Jesus; that He is no impersonator. Jesus is the real deal! He's the Son of God; the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Only Jesus is the Light that shines in the darkness of all sin and offers everyone life and salvation for free! In His name, Amen.