

With Us While We Wait – Part Three: Witness

John 1:6-8; 19-28; Psalm 126

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Who are you? And what are you doing – what’s your purpose? We cannot live, *not really*, without some clear sense of an answer to these questions.

I. Humility

John the Baptist is a “model” or “paradigm” for living an Advent posture.

“⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John.”⁷ He came as a **witness to testify** concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.” – John 1:6-8

Here’s the first thing to see: John’s *humility* is a paradigm, a model, for our witness.

“Jesus is the light; John is a reflection of the light.” – Leslie Newbiggin

The same is true for us. We are not the source of the light; but we get to reflect Jesus’ light to a world in darkness.

What *does* it mean to be a “witness”?

First, you see something, or hear something, you experience something. And second, you share what you’ve seen, heard, or experienced.

To be a “witness” to Jesus comes out of our experience of hearing the word of God, and then of experiencing the Spirit’s transformative power, the presence of Jesus with us. And then we talk about who Jesus is – based primarily on the first witnesses accounts, those who wrote down the words and deeds of Jesus. But we also bear witness to his work *in us*. So, it’s that news, the “good news”, the gospel.

So, everyone who is a Christian is, is at some level, a “witness.” Like John, it’s humbly pointing to the one who loved us – and gave himself for us.

John says of Jesus: “He must increase; I must decrease.” – John 3:30

That’s the Advent posture we adopt.

What might this look like for us this week?

- Finding ways to support those people around you who are growing their ministry giftings by praying for them – asking God to keep strengthening them in their faith and

their work. It's offering specific words of encouragement **as you notice God's gifting in them.**

- Using your influence in your workplace or your home, not to promote yourself, but to give others opportunity for growth and learning.

II. Identity and Calling

In John 1:19-28 we see that John knows *exactly* who he is and what he is called to do. At one level, we can all do the same.

For those who have come to faith in Jesus, we can point to the Scriptures and say:

- We are...God's beloved; lavishly loved children of God
- We are...A new creation; Christ's ambassadors; servants of the Most-High God; a friend of God
- We are...Set free and forgiven; holy through Jesus' finished work; reconciled to the Father
- We are...Agents of God's mercy; peacemakers; those filled with the Spirit; a member of the body of Christ, the Church, the people of God; a "sent-one"; a missionary

"In crucifixion scenes, John the Baptist is often (anachronistically) depicted with an elongated finger pointing up to Christ. This is what the church is called to do, no more and no less: to set aside distractions and temptations and always and everywhere point to Jesus." – Benjamin Crosby

III. Joy (Even in the Pain)

Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

²Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,

"The LORD has done great things for them."

³The LORD has done great things for us,

and we are filled with joy.

⁴Restore our fortunes, LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

Hebrew poetry and songs like this tend to have a “centre”, which spells out the main theme. For those who want to be fancy, scholars call this a “chiastic structure.”

The centre line – the “middle” – of this text is **“and we are filled with joy.”**

“Joy has a history. Joy is the verified, repeated experience of those involved in what God is doing. It is a real date in history, as solid as a stratum of rock in Palestine. Joy is nurtured by living in such a history, building on such a foundation.” – Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Advent calls us to look back. On Christmas Eve we celebrate God’s great rescue mission that comes in the smallest possible package – the birth of God’s own Son.

Advent also has a deeply future orientation. And so does this Psalm.

On the other side of the present tense “we are filled with joy,” is the future hope.

First, a prayer: “Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.” – Psalm 126:4

The Negev is an area in the south of Israel, with deep groves and gouges formed by erosion. But for most of the year those streambeds are dry, hard caked by the baking sun, with no water. And yet, every now and again, the rains *do* come, and the whole area bursts into life – flowers and grasses springing up through the cracked earth.

Aren’t our lives often like that? Sometimes long season of waiting and watching and what feels like dryness.

Yes, there are these “groves” we can look back at – places where we know that God has been at work in the past, but it might be a long season of what feels like no rain at all. And then, God intervenes.

We can, and do, look back to God’s saving actions in the past. We can, and do, look back to the ways God has spoken, has acted in our lives too. And that feeds our sense that, yes, like a farmer sows seeds, there will come a harvest – eventually.

That’s the hope that soaks through the story of God. It’s the hope that is built into this Advent season too.

“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” – Psalm 126:5-6

“It is clear in Psalm 126 that the one who wrote it and those who sang it were no strangers to the dark side of things. They carried the painful memory of exile in the bones and the scars of oppression on their backs. They knew the deserts of the heart and the nights of weeping. They knew what it meant to sow in tears.

One of the most interesting and remarkable things Christians learn is that laughter does not exclude weeping. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed.

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks, get rid of disappointment by depersonalizing your relationships. And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment. There isn't a hint of that in Psalm 126.” – Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Our witness, like that of John – and the faithful servants of Jesus who have gone before us – often comes from **the way we look at and respond to our own suffering**. It's not a denial of the darkness, nor a sense of hopeless despair.

Here's the promise of Jesus to us his sent, missionary people. “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” – Matthew 28:20

So, we patiently wait on God, even through the times of drought, because we trust his promises.

The joy of the moment is not something we “work up” – with more tinsel, or more sprinkles, or more presents, or more caffeine. It rather like Psalm 126. As Peterson puts it:

“There is plenty of suffering on both sides, past and future. The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears, and, in his resurrection work, create the smile of new life. Joy is what God gives, not what we work up.” – Eugene Peterson.

Maybe today is for you to recalibrate? To answer again – or afresh these questions: Who are you? And what are you doing? And will you embrace the sort of joy, that only God can give – joy that holds the tears and laughter together?

Life Group Discussion and Reflection:

Open Up

What comes to mind when you hear the word “witness”? Why?

Dig In

1. Look at **John 1:6-8**. How is John the Baptist described?
2. Look at **John 1:19-28**. How does John describe himself and his calling?
3. In what ways do we, as God’s people today, share those same features of identity and calling?
4. Read the following quote:

“In crucifixion scenes, John the Baptist is often (anachronistically) depicted with an elongated finger pointing up to Christ. This is what the church is called to do, no more and no less: to set aside distractions and temptations and always and everywhere point to Jesus.” – Benjamin Crosby

What are the distractions and temptations that we, as God’s people, or you personally, need to set aside?

How might you help “point to Jesus” through this season, and into the new year?

5. **Read Psalm 126**. The centre, present tense line reads: “and we are filled with joy.”
 - a. Why is joy a central feature of Christian life and witness?
 - b. How can a Christian person have joy, even in pain and suffering?
 - c. How might the way we relate to our pain and to God in our suffering be a part of our witness to the world?

Pray

Take time to thank God for his lavish love for us – that he would come to forgive and heal us, to make us new and give us a sure hope. Ask God to help deepen our “missional-identity”, our sense that we are a sent people. Pray for the needs of your group and our broader community and world.