

John 1:19-34

Sunday after Christmas

INJ

In Roman mythology, Janus is regarded as the god of all beginnings. He was pictured on the coins as having two faces, one looking backward and one looking forward. Given that depiction, the month of January was named after him. To this day, as we approach a new year, we still do some looking back over the past year as well as focusing on the year to come. Perhaps you have made some New Year's resolutions or set goals for 2018.

In our text for today, the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses both hindsight and foresight to direct the reader. To do this, John the Baptist appears on stage. (In the traditional lectionary we would have heard from him in Advent, but in the new lectionary he appears after Christmas. Regardless of when we meet up with him, the role of the Baptist serves to focus our attention as this Gospel writer begins to tell the story).

A group of Jewish leaders approach John with the question, "Who are you?" He responded first by saying who he was NOT. He was NOT the Messiah. Also, he was neither Elijah come back to earth nor was he a prophet. All of these figures had been promised in the Old Testament prophecy and they reflected a variety of Jewish expectations concerning the coming of the Messiah who would deliver God's people.

These Jewish leaders were persistent. They wouldn't take a negative for an answer. Again they asked, "Who are you?"

This time John responded by quoting the prophet Isaiah. He was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness. 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" The original intent of that passage from Deutero – Isaiah was to proclaim God was about to act to bring his people home from their exile in Babylon. By quoting that verse John's intent was basically the same. God was about to act again to save his people.

But that answer still didn't satisfy the Jewish leaders. They follow up with still another question. "if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah, why are you baptizing?"

John responded by minimizing his role as a baptizer and diverting their attention to someone they didn't know. That person was already in their midst. By comparison, John didn't even consider himself worthy to untie this other man's sandal.

It appeared that John had another opportunity the next day to be more specific in his answer to the Jewish leaders. On that second day, Jesus appeared for the first time in the Fourth Gospel account, but he didn't say a word. He appears to have been a relatively unknown person at that moment in time.

This was John's moment to perform his primary role. He spelled out just who this Jesus was by proclaiming two titles which belonged to Jesus. First, he was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Upon hearing this, Jewish people would have recalled the Passover lambs whose blood saved the households of their ancestors and brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

In case there was any doubt about whether this title belonged to Jesus, the writer of this Gospel would allude to this image of the Lamb again in chapter 19. There he stated that Jesus was crucified about noon. That was the exact hour when all of the Passover lambs were slaughtered on the day of preparation for Passover. Later in the day, the Jews got permission from Pilate to break the legs of those being crucified, so they wouldn't remain on their crosses over Passover. They did so for the men on either side of Jesus. But when they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead, so they did not break his legs. Like the other Passover lambs, no bones in Jesus body were broken.

But how did the Baptist know that Jesus was the Lamb of God? John explained this was revealed to him when he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove and remain on him.

The importance of the Spirit and remaining or abiding in the Spirit will be developed later in this Fourth Gospel! For now, it is important to note the term "remain" denotes the close intimate tie between the Spirit and Jesus.

The Baptist isn't quite done with his testimony. He announces this Jesus has another title. Not only is Jesus the Lamb of God, he also is the Son of God. This is the traditional title for the Messiah. It connects the Messiah as the ideal Davidic king of Israel. This title or the shorter form "Son" is used frequently in John's Gospel account. It shows the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son.

At this point the Baptist has filled his role in a way that is an example for all of us. His witness enables people to come to Christ. This role of witness is a privilege of the highest kind.

Like John, we all are called to witness the love shown to us in Christ. We reflect Christ's love to the people we meet in our daily lives. Sometimes we do this well, but many times we fall short in our witness.

At all times we are called to remember the source of our power to witness. We can reflect God's love to those we meet because God has loved us first. We know God has loved his people by recalling history. That's what the Baptist was doing when he called the Jewish people to remember how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt at the first Passover and again how He had brought them out of exile in Babylon. Then John called the people of his day to trust that God would save them once more by this man Jesus. This story of Jesus, the Lamb of God and the Son of the Father, is what continues to speak to us today and into the future. This incarnation of the Word made flesh saves us. The Fourth Gospel writer has to unpack his story, but he has laid the framework already by the mouth of the Baptist. That story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection remains our power source to witness Christ's love to others.

In my opening, I said the New Year is a time to look back as well as a time to gaze into the future. Some of our best examples of witness to God's love come from those who have gone before us. In closing, I cite two examples.

For the first of these, we only need to go back a few weeks. Some of you experienced this witness of faith with me. I am referring to the powerful witness of faith Shirley Moeller left for us at her funeral. Some would call it a no-frills funeral. It was simple and to the point. There was no eulogy because Shirley didn't want one. Like John the Baptist, the message wasn't about her. Instead, the message was an expression of thanks for what God had done for her. She had pre-selected hymns like "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and Scripture readings from Romans 8 where we were reminded "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Each piece of the service had been carefully chosen to drive home her beautiful witness. She thanked, praised and trusted in her Savior and Lord. Not even death could rattle that trust.

For the second example of trust in God, we need to travel just over 100 years back in time. I am reminded of this because a 20th Anniversary re-release of the movie "Titanic" is coming out soon. I recall the final scene in the movie. As the ship was sinking, the 8 member band led by Wallace Hartley played music to calm the other passengers who remained on board. At first they played some bright, snappy dance music to keep the passengers from panicking. Then they switched to a hymn which Hartley wanted to be played at his funeral. The words of the familiar hymn go as follows:

**Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me;
Still all my song shall be, nearer my God, to Thee.
nearer my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee.**

**Though like the wanderer, the sun go down,
Darkness be over me, my rest a stone;
Yet in my dreams I'd be nearer, my God to Thee,
Nearer, my God to Thee, nearer to Thee!**

(insert Titanic film clip?)

Notice in both Shirley's witness and the words of this hymn, do either say no ill will befall the faithful? What they do say is that even when life seems at its darkest, they trust in the God who came down to live and die with us on this earth. They trusted in the Lamb of God. That is the message of the cross, even as we contemplate the Babe in the cradle in Bethlehem.

This same faith of Shirley and of Wallace Hartley can empower us to live and share God's word as we live into 2018 and beyond under the shadow of the cross of Christ. God has been our help in the past and will continue to be our hope for the future, so let us sing with the Baptist, Shirley and all the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us:

"Thanks be to God!" Amen!