



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Crying Out in the Wilderness

St. John 1:19-27

Fr. William Klock

December 11, 2011 — Advent 2

I want to continue this morning with our Advent look at John the Baptist and how he models evangelism for us. If you're following along in your Bibles, we'll be looking at John 1:19-28. These verses give us the first account of John's encounter with the Jewish religious leaders. The priests and Levites had been hearing about this firebrand—almost a wild man who sounded a lot like a second Elijah—who was preaching to the masses, who was proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom, and who was baptizing people in the Jordan. The baptizing part would have been scandalous to the religious leaders—I'll talk more about that later.

And so the Jewish religious leaders sent some representative to confront John. They asked him, "Who do you think you are?" I want to look this morning at his response. There's a lot we can learn from it, but I want to look specifically at *four* ways that John's response should shape and inform our own evangelistic work.

*First*, as we look at verse 19 we can see that John *witnessed the Good News with his life*. We read there:

**And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"**

They were curious and probably not a little suspicious, angry, and maybe even jealous that John was attracting "their" sheep. St. Mark tells us in his Gospel: "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river

Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:4-5).

People were drawn to John. He proclaimed a powerful message, but more importantly, he lived out that message in his life. Augustine points out that John's excellence was so great that people believed he was the Christ, the Messiah. Think about that: The message he preached was so powerful and the way he lived his life was so different that people who didn't know better just assumed that he was the Christ. His witness was *that* powerful! People who were spiritually desperate saw hope in John the Baptist. Even these sceptical religious leaders who came to ask who he was could tell there was something different about John. And so they came and asked him: "Are you the Christ?"

And John gives them his answer in verse 20. The way St. John describes the Baptist's answer sounds weird in English—it sounds even weirder in Greek. They asked, "Are you the Christ?" Then:

**He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."**

"He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed." The point of the convoluted grammar is that John made it unequivocally clear that he was *not* the Christ—*not* the Messiah. It sounds like they were expecting him to say that he was. If he'd said, "Why, yes, I am the Christ," they probably would have hauled him off to trial or chalked him up as another crazy false prophet. There had been and would continue to be lots of people falsely claiming to be the Christ. But John makes it clear that he's not the Christ. Then, taken aback, they ask:

**"What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"** (John 1:21-22)

They knew there was something *different* about John. Malachi had prophesied that in the last days Elijah

would come back and herald the coming of God's kingdom and John was a lot like Elijah—he even dressed the part and lived in the wilderness. But John denies being Elijah. Maybe then, if he wasn't a modern-day Elijah, he was the "Prophet"—a modern-day Moses. The Jews were looking for a deliverer and the religious leaders were threatened by the possibility that such a deliverer might have come. John said that he wasn't any of those things—even though he had in fact come in fulfillment of those old prophecies. But people flocked to him nonetheless because he offered them hope—not only with his message, but also *with his own life*.

Brothers and sisters, we ought to be doing the same thing. Our lives should offer people hope and make them constructively curious. Think of the invitation we hear each Sunday before the Offertory: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Evangelism is more than just *telling* people about the Good News of the cross of Christ. It's also about *living* that Good News out in our lives. The most effective witness *begins* with a living witness.

I hear people say all the time, "But I don't know how to share my faith." Friends, let it start with the way you live your life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

"The first great step in evangelising is that we should start with ourselves and become sanctified...When the man of the world sees that you and I have got something that he obviously has not got, when he finds us calm and quiet when we are taken ill; when he finds we can smile in the face of death; when he finds about us a poise, a balance, and equanimity and a loving, gentle quality...he will begin to take notice. He will say, 'That man has got something,' and he will begin to enquire as to what it is. And he will want it."

We need to ask ourselves: "Am I living in such a way that people want what I've got? Do people see something in my life that gives them hope?" That's the place to start.

The *second* important thing we learn from John's example is something we touched on last time: *his witness was not about himself*. They asked, "Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?" Every time John told them "No". John knew that he was not the Saviour, that he was not the solution to their problems, and that he wasn't the one to be trusted in for salvation.

John *could* have made some claim on being Elijah. In Luke's Gospel we read that when angel announced his birth to Zechariah he said that he was the one who would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah". Jesus even pointed back to the Old Testament prophets when he said that John was "Elijah who is to come". John did fulfil those prophecies as a modern-day Elijah, but when he was asked, he made it clear: "I am *not* Elijah." There are two reasons why. First, many of the people were looking for the real Elijah to somehow come back from the dead. That's not who John was. He came in the spirit of Elijah, but he wasn't actually Elijah. But more importantly, the people associated the new Elijah and the "Prophet" with the Messiah and John knew he was not the Messiah. He was just there to point people to the Messiah. So instead of saying, "Yes, I'm the "Elijah" prophesied," he says instead, "No, I'm not Elijah...but..."

**I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.** (John 1:23)

John accepted the role of a new Elijah and, as in ancient times Elijah had called the people to repentance, John now called the people to repentance again, because God's kingdom was at hand.

We need to follow John's example, remembering that our witness is not about ourselves. You and I have no power to save anyone. All we can do is to make sure our own lives are witnesses to the Good News and point to Jesus Christ. I find it troubling when I see big name Christians with ministries named after themselves.

There are a lot of them: "So-and-so Ministries". That's not to say that all of them are bad or ego-driven, but I've noticed that in too many cases, those ministries named after men are too often about the man than they are about Jesus. But it's not just big-name preachers or televangelists. Any time you and I start encouraging people to focus on us or on our works without redirecting them to Jesus, we're not really evangelising them. I think it's more tempting than we realise. We can do a lot of good works in the world without upsetting anybody. In fact, doing good works will often get us noticed by the world. The world likes do-gooders. And so it can be easy for us to take the credit ourselves. But brothers and sisters, that means stealing the credit from Jesus. It means failing at being witnesses. Sometimes it's a challenge; as soon as the world starts applauding our good works and we point away from ourselves and tell them our good works are only the result of Jesus' Holy Spirit working through us, people start getting upset.

Brothers and sisters, we need to remember that we minister in Jesus' name—not our own. We need to remember that we're called to do good works not so that people will look up to us, but so they will see God at work through us and then give *him* glory. The Jewish leaders came to John and asked who he was. He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.' This should be our witness too: "I'm here to show that you need a Saviour and to point you to the One you should worship and trust. Don't praise me. Praise him for the great things he's done through me."

The *third* point naturally follows. If we aren't witnessing ourselves, then *we are witnessing Jesus*. Even when our motives are good, it's easy to get distracted from witnessing Jesus. Verse 24 tells us that some Pharisees approached him and they asked:

**"Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"** (John 1:25)

You see, the people knew that when the Messiah came there would be some kind of baptism or cleansing involved. Zechariah 13:1 says, "On that day there shall be a *fountain* opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to *cleanse* them from sin and uncleanness." But why was John baptising if he wasn't the Messiah...or Elijah or the Prophet? Look how John answers in verse 26:

**John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."** (John 1:26-27)

John could have gone off-track and been bogged down in defending himself. He could have backed off his preaching. But he didn't. Instead he pointed them to Jesus *again*—and then he stood firm on the authority he had in Jesus. The Pharisees thought that John was the problem, but John knew better. He knew *their problem was that they didn't know Jesus*.

Brothers and sisters, can you see how we face the same problem as we witness the Good News? I think we've all faced hostility from people when we start sharing the Gospel. We see people in the public square becoming more and more hostile toward Christians all the time. And it's really easy for us to get bogged down in defending ourselves. Lately it seems our favourite response is to complain loudly in public about our rights being infringed and then call for legislation to defend us. Friends, that's just what the enemy wants—for us to be distracted from our *real* mission. The world isn't angry with us so much as it's angry with the Jesus they don't yet know. They don't know his love. They don't know his mercy. They don't understand that he died for their sins. They don't know Jesus. *They're living in the dark*.

That means that when we encounter hostility, we should be less concerned about justifying ourselves or defending our personal rights. Instead, we should be more concerned about introducing

them to the Jesus they don't know. Here's one example we've probably all encountered. People really don't like the idea that Jesus is the only way to God. People really don't like the idea that without faith in Jesus as our Saviour all of us are bound for hell. I've heard Christians say that they simply don't know what to do when they're faced with these objections. Often times it's when we start talking about the exclusivity of our faith and the uniqueness of Jesus as the *only* Saviour that people start getting abusive with us. The solution isn't to give up and it's certainly not to simply avoid a difficult subject like this. *The solution is to share Jesus.* Once we begin to introduce them to Jesus—to God-become-man to save men and women from their sins—then things start to fall into place. Maybe not right away, but as people begin to know Jesus they realise that his Incarnation, his life, his death on the cross, and his rising again to life make sense out of all their objections. If sinners don't go to hell, why did God need to send Jesus to die for us? And if there are many paths to God, why would God sacrifice his own Son to give us yet another new path when there are already so many others? As we introduce people to Jesus, they gradually start to see that the real question is why anyone would turn away from Jesus.

The Apostle John writes in 1:14 that Jesus is the Word made flesh; in 1:9 he tells us that Jesus is “the true light, which gives light to everyone”; in 1:4 he says that, “in him was life, and the life was the light of men.” These are the things that we need to have at the core of our witnessing: that Jesus is the light and the life.

Finally, let me wrap this up with the *fourth* point. Back in verse 23, John told these people who asked who he was: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” And, brothers and sisters, you and I need to be the same thing; *we need to be voices crying out in the wilderness.* Richard Phillips writes, “A wilderness is a place of barrenness, poverty, and death. We must show people that this present life is a

wilderness apart from Christ. Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:3). We must be candid with people about the real misery, emptiness, or bondage they experience. The world devotes itself to denying these things; Christians must point out the truth.”

Knowing that we're called to be crying out the Good News in the midst of the wilderness is what should give *urgency* to our ministry. One of the reasons why we're so often slack in our evangelism, one of the reasons why we lack the urgency we should have is, I'm convinced, because we don't see the wilderness around us. For some people it may be because they've cloistered themselves away in their little Christian ghetto and they hardly have any dealings with non-Christians. For a lot of Christians, we're so worldly, so unsanctified, so conformed to the wilderness ourselves, that's we've lost almost all sense that the wilderness is a place of spiritual death and poverty. And for some of us, I think we may have simply found ways to tune out the fact that there are people all around us in our day-to-day lives who are bound for hell if they don't hear and receive the Gospel. It's kind of an overwhelming thing to consider that so many of the people around us face an eternity in hell if they don't turn to Jesus, and so we learn to simply turn a blind eye to that fact. If we learn to ignore it, we can squelch what can easily become overwhelming—seeing everyone around us in such a desperate condition—but in the process we also end up squelching the urgency we should have in wanting to tell them about Jesus. I have to admit myself, that when I look at the world and at the people around me—sometimes my own friends and family members—the first thing that comes to mind isn't usually that they are bound for eternal torment and eternal damnation for their sins if they don't trust in Jesus and his cross. But at the same time, if I were to be the first person to come on a bad car accident, I know my first thought would probably be, “These people are going to die if I don't help them!” I'd jump in to do what I could. We need to see the

spiritual wilderness of world with that same sense of urgency. Instead of trying to avoid being overwhelmed, we need to remember that *we have the answer!*

As I've had the occasional opportunity to talk to people with the gift of evangelism, one of the things I've realised is that they've never tuned out the world's need of a Saviour. They've never tuned out the wilderness. They look at the world and they see a giant spiritual car accident full of people who will die without their help. They *know* that they are called to be voices crying out in the wilderness. They *know* that men and women will go to hell without Jesus. And they know that God has entrusted them—entrusted us, his people—with the Good News of the cross of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, let us open our eyes to the wilderness—to the world's great need. And let us never be overwhelmed by that need, but let us always remember that we have the answer. Let us always be ready to proclaim the Gospel. Let us show the world by our lives what it means to live in the grace of God that the people around us might become constructively curious. And then when they come, just as the Jews came to John the Baptist, let us proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand, let us call them to repentance, and let us point them to the saving cross of the Lord Jesus.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for the saving grace you have given us through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Give us the grace to be faithful and bold in our witness. Make us holy as you are holy that the world might see you in us, and give us boldness to proclaim the Good News of eternal life through your Son. We ask this in his name. Amen.