

March 13, 2022  
The Second Sunday In Lent  
Pastor Matt Duerr

### **Witnesses to Christ – The First Witness**

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be to you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. How many times have you seen a movie or show that revolves around the concept of a witness? You know a movie, a TV show, that has a storyline that goes something like this; an atrocious or ingenious crime has been committed. Whoever did it was obviously a professional or extremely smart because there was no evidence left, no fingerprints, no clues of any kind. However, what this ingenious criminal had not thought about was that eyewitness the person that you could say; was well if you're the criminal, the wrong person at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Or if you're in favor of justice, the right person, in the right place, at the right time. The show, the movie revolves around getting the eyewitness to the witness stand because without the eyewitness the prosecution's case is empty. With the witness, the criminal is going to get nailed and of course the criminal doesn't want this. And they're ingenious and all that kind of stuff so they go through all these steps to prevent the witness from getting to the stand. Meanwhile the prosecution does everything they can to keep the witness safe.

Why do I begin with this? Because that's what we're going to be doing during Lent. We are going to be putting Jesus on trial. He claimed to be the Son of God. Now should we believe Him or not? Let's bring in the witnesses, the eyewitnesses. We'll need to establish who they were, what makes them a good witness. We of course need to see or hear what they've heard or saw and what they would say about it. Who would be the first witness if Jesus was on trial and we could call such people to the stand?

Let's go with a very novel, legal approach and start with first John the Baptist. I can just imagine him taking the stand and one of the very first things a lawyer would do is try to establish or tear apart his credentials, his viability, his truthfulness. And so, I could imagine he

would take the stand and an attorney would say something like, 'Mr Baptist, or John, tell us a little bit about yourself. What makes you, you?' And I could imagine John the Baptist saying something like this. 'Well I was born to my parents Zechariah and Elizabeth who were members of the tribe of Levi. Therefore, my dad was a priest. He was a priest of the division of Abijah.' Probably about there, the attorney would step in and go tribe, division, what are you talking about? John would have to say, you know, well there's 12 tribes of Israel. The Levites were one of the 12, the descendants of Levi. They were chosen by God to be the priests, so my dad was a priest. But there needs to be order in worship at the Temple and so the tribe of Levi's was divided into 24 divisions or clans. Each division would serve twice during the year for a week at a time in the Temple leading the worship, the sacrifices, the prayers. And in that clan or division, my dad's, you know looking at Abijah, they would cast lots to see which priest would serve. The lot fell to my dad and his job then was to offer up the prayers of the people before the Lord at the altar of incense in the holy place.

And it was there that the Angel Gabriel appeared to my dad. Now it was obvious to everybody outside that something happened because the Old Testament, as you call it the Torah, is full of examples of priests who did not honor God who were using their position inappropriately and God struck them dead. And so, the priests had little bells tied to the bottom of their robes so that as they moved around in the holy place tending to the lampstands, going to pray at the altar of incense, the people would hear the jingling of the bells. But if those bells stopped for too long a period of time, there was great worry.

That's what happened when my dad was in there, and the Angel Gabriel appeared to him, gave to him an amazing message that my mom who was as old as my dad was old, was barren, had no children; and the Angel told him Elizabeth who has been barren will quote "bear you now a son," that would be me. He told my dad you are to name him John, which by the way is just a perfect name because John means graced by God. And grace is an undeserved gift, or undeserved love, and my parents are sinners. I'm a sinner. They didn't deserve a child, but God gave them to me or gave me to them I should say.

Anyways the Angel continued on and instructed my dad that I was to be raised like a Nazarite. I was not to have any wine or drink any strong drink and told him that I would be filled with the Holy Spirit. And I'll even quote him "even from his mother's womb." He said that many would rejoice at my birth and that I would be great before God. Not before man, great before God, and I will turn many to the Lord. And finally, that I would go before Him; and understand Him there, is God. I would go before God. I would come, I would be the one spoken of in the Old Testament, to prepare the way of the of the Lord, the Messiah. Now I know that sounds incredible and unbelievable, and that's what my dad thought. He doubted, the Angel told him he wouldn't be able to speak, and he was made dumb. He could not speak until I was born because he, like probably many of you here in the courtroom, found it hard to believe.

When I was born, there were many people there. They thought I should be named Zechariah and my mother of course said no he's supposed to be John. But a bunch of Levites, they're not going to listen to the words of my mom. She's a woman. They looked at my dad and motioned to him that he needed to tell them what the name was, and he got a piece of paper, and he went to write it. And as he wrote it, he said, he got his voice back. His name is John. And get this, many marveled and rejoiced, which is exactly what that Angel said.

Now there's something else here. I mentioned I was to prepare the way for the Lord, the coming Messiah. So, before I was born, the mother of the Messiah, Mary who was a cousin of my mom's; came to greet my mom. Now my mom was also pregnant, farther along than Mary was, but as soon as Mary got to the house and said something, I leapt in my mother's womb with joy. Of course, I wasn't born yet, I don't remember it. Mom told me about it. But she understood it was fulfillment of the promise, "I would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from my mother's womb." And that is the way my parents raised me. With this knowledge of this announcement from an Angel that I was to be the one spoken of in Isaiah, the one who was to prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight, be the voice crying in the wilderness.

And the message is the age-old message: repent! I got the opportunity to add to it, repent the Kingdom of God is near. The

Messiah's right around the corner and you know, at that time hearts were ready for that message. Part of it was because of the Roman occupation and no one likes to be oppressed and under some other nations rule. But worse, we were under another occupation. The Temple, our religion had been taken over, was occupied. But the chief priests, Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes; they were corrupt. And they used the temple. They used our faith, our religion, as a way to fill their pockets with money. So when they came out to see me, to hear about what I was doing, I called them what they were, a brood of Vipers.'

I can just imagine at that point in time the attorney would step in and you know, say; 'a brood of Vipers, what are you talking about?' I could imagine John would continue something like this. 'Well you know a viper is a poisonous snake and Satan, he took on the form of a snake when he tempted Eve and Adam. That was a deadly temptation, that's what literally brought death into the world. And so they got the message real clear when I said brood of vipers. They understood I was saying you are children of Satan. And they were not too happy about that. But I told them what I told everybody else. Bear fruits of repentance. Some who heard that message asked the question, 'what must we do?' And I told them; 'repent, acknowledge your sin, turn away from it and pursue righteousness.'

Then there were those the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes the Chief Priests, they just got angry and wanted to kill me. And then there were some who took it in next the next step, and they misunderstood. They thought I was the Messiah they said he is the Messiah. And really, that's what you're interested in, right? I could imagine him turning and looking and saying, what do you mean that's what I'm interested in? I could imagine John again continuing; 'well your real issue is why believe me? Let me ask you one question. What drove the Chief Priest, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes to corruption? Was it not dollars? I believe you here in America, you have a little saying something like, 'money talks.' Understand when people said he is the Messiah, I could have had it. I could have said, that's right, I'm the Messiah and so start giving me your tithes and offerings. I could have easily said, and the Lord doesn't want 10% he wants 20, 30, 40% and the rich even more. We would call it social justice shall we. That's not right! That's not what I was called to

do. And so I did not let money talk, that's part of why you should believe me. I went and I baptized people with water, but I pointed them to what was most important, that the Messiah was coming, and He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with power. I made it very clear. I'm not the Messiah! I wasn't even worthy to be a slave, a foreign slave. Now normally a foreign slave is allowed to tie the master's sandals. I wasn't good enough to even do that.' I could imagine the attorney would say, that is very interesting. Where did all this stuff take place? 'Oh, Bethany over on the other side of the Jordan in the wilderness area.

Well had you ever seen Jesus? I mean we've heard your background. Now did you ever see Him, other than the experience in the womb you shared? And I could imagine John coming back and saying no. Nope not for 33 years. Well then how will the world did you know Him? This is where John's message, his testimony gets interesting. Well God told me. God told me because I had that same question as you. I don't know Him, how will I know Him? God told me, "you'll know because you'll see the Holy Spirit descend on him in the form of a dove and remain on Him." And then one day when I was down in the Jordan baptizing those who wanted to be baptized, I saw this man coming down towards the water and out of heaven a dove came down, landed on Him and stayed on Him as He walked. I knew it's Him, the Messiah. And I called out, "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" My dad had so clearly taught that to me. It's what the Bible says, what scripture teaches. We need a Messiah to take our sin away permanently, eternally. The blood of a lamb, the blood of a goat, the blood of a bull; it's incapable I paid the price of the sin of a human, the pinnacle of God's creation. Oh, OK, so what you're saying is you saw the dove, you connected the dots with your belief system, with what your parents told you. And what you're saying is we're supposed to accept it too? Believe that too? That's what you expect of us? Imagine John again, continuing 'yeah, I know I get it. It sounds too good to be true. Or maybe you looked at me with my long hair and my garments of camel skin, and my grasshoppers for dinner, and you think oh he's just a hippie and he had some drug induced hallucination.

To be honest, I began to think that myself' because I was in prison for speaking the truth of God's word. Again the question if I'm done the

one Isaiah spoke about to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight, shouldn't be I'd be out there making his path straight? And here I am in prison. Why isn't He delivering me so I can do my job? And so I had two of my disciples go to Him with a very simple question. Are you the One? Do you know what Jesus's answer was? Dead Silence. Because He knows words are cheap. Instead, when they asked Are you the One? He went over to a blind man gave him his sight back. On the fringe of the crowd there were some lepers, He healed him. Like my dad, there was a guy there who was deaf and mute. Right there He healed them. In fact, He healed everybody in the crowd that had any illness. This came right after He had raised a young man from the dead. And that's when Jesus finally spoke to my disciples and said tell John what you see, what have they seen. You're going to say to me by some miracles and you're right, some miracles, that which only God could do. But much, much more than that they saw prophecy fulfilled. Because this is what the prophets had said, and Jesus fulfilled every one of those prophecies.

And then there was one more thing again prophetic. He also told me when you see the good news preached to the poor, meaning of course the poor in spirit, those who realize their sinners and they need a Savior; and through those actions and through those simple little words He took me back to my heritage, to my parents teaching of God's word. And I knew, yes, He is the one. That's all I need. But at that time, I could imagine some attorney looking at me and saying, "are you serious?" You know, I'm totally serious. In fact, I guess you could say I'm dead serious. Because I was willing to die for Him, for His word. I was not going back down from the truth in any way, shape, or form.

And so I ask you, are you dead serious? Do you know He is the One, there is no other? If so, it is my hope and my prayer that you prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness of people don't know Him and in this society that is so terribly lost. In our Savior's Name, Amen.