

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was God and through this One Word all things came into being. This One Word is the Word that lives among us, it is the glory of God among us, it is the light that even the darkness of this world cannot overcome. And I would add that this Word is the word that has been communicated to us as Baptized children of God and is the word we speak and communicate to each other and to others about God...this word is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

My opening “words” were of course a paraphrase of the opening of John’s Gospel. However, looking at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we get the baby Jesus in the manger in them, along with Mary and Joseph in a barn surrounded by shepherds and various animals, in what is known as the Birth Narrative. In Mark’s Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ begins with Isaiah proclaiming words that testify about a messenger who will prepare the way. That messenger is John the Baptist who then Baptizes Jesus in the Jordan and off Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days.

But today on this, the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, we are in the Gospel of John and in the beginning of this Gospel we get this cosmological sort of birth narrative. In the middle of this cosmic manifestation or this cosmic revelation of Jesus, we hear about a man sent from God, whose name is John, who will be a witness that will testify about this Word and who this Word is.

This passage that is before us today is a continuation of the opening to John’s Gospel and it is dominated by verbs of witness such as “see,” “witness,” and “say.” We hear this in John’s testimony...as he tells of witnessing the Baptism of Jesus. John’s words will tell others about who this Word is. It is John’s words that directs us to the One Word that becomes flesh, Jesus. Jesus then becomes our communication that directs the world to Him.

If you look closely at the opening sentence of the Gospel of John, the Greek syntax, or the arrangement of the words within this verse literally directs the reader or it reveals to the reader, the very last word which is God. The words on the page, literally takes us the reader to God. As this extraordinarily crafted opening identifies for us our Savior, Jesus Christ who is God among us, so too, within the testimony of his witness to the revelation of this Word, John the Baptist’s testimony reveals for us the true Life and Light...that is this Word made manifest in this very human Jesus Christ.

In the Season of Epiphany, we celebrate this very thing, we celebrate the manifestation or the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and we plainly hear this revelation today in our Gospel lesson as John’s testimony directs us to Jesus who places us in relationship with God:

<sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." <sup>32</sup> And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." <sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Today, once again, as of old, we hear John's words that testify to the Baptism of Jesus...his words take us to the presence of God in Jesus Christ...bringing that presence among us. We have before us today, John's words that testify to who Jesus is. While we know that John is sent from God, and there is the will of God to consider, but just suppose for a moment John said nothing about what he witnessed ...what now? There are no other witnesses at this Baptism according to the writers of John's Gospel, so suppose John says nothing? How does this play out? My point to the question about John's silence is the point of the passage that is before us today within this passage...our faith is our witness and it ought to be our testimony...our testimony not just with words or speech but in deed and in truth.

But unfortunately, we live in a culture that predicates an etiquette that frowns upon the mention of politics and religion in public conversation or discussion. So, let me ask as Bonhoeffer asked in a letter written in 1944 from his prison cell to Eberhard Bethge; what do church, community, a sermon, liturgy, or a Christian life mean in a religion-less world? In other words, how do we speak of God in this religion-less world?<sup>1</sup> How do we speak of God when it is unacceptable? The truth is, we don't! Our witness or our testimony is not shared with words because we know that it is not acceptable to do so. Moreover, if we are bold enough to do so, we may then feel that we don't have the knowledge or the ability to do so. Either way, when we do...this is when the Word becomes flesh...our flesh. Keep in mind too, that Christ is made manifest when our witness and our testimony become our actions, our deeds, and our truth. But no matter the formation of our testimony, when we do this, may we remember that it is not us who is making the manifestation of grace and mercy known, we are simply making the presence of the Word known, we are revealing Jesus Christ to a religion-less-world.

Nonetheless, we remain reluctant in our witness and are testimony and we leave it to the scholars, the theologians, the clergy, and even those who can quote scripture chapter and verse. From our Gospel lesson today, we hear John the Baptist testify:

<sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." (John 1:34)

John is saying that he didn't know Jesus, but he did other things that revealed Jesus to the world. We do not fully know Jesus. Quite frankly, we wouldn't know Jesus if he walked into this church or stood on the corner out there selling popsicles. But we know the Good News of the promise of the one who takes away the sin of the world. We know the presence that is Jesus Christ in Word and in Sacrament. And it is this Word that we take with us and communicate as we go from here. Bonhoeffer said that, "There is meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveler." I mention this quote from Bonhoeffer because this is the very heart of our lesson today from the Gospel of John. In this appointed Gospel lesson, we learn quickly that there is much meaning to our faith that is unknown to the believer. But herein lies the beauty of our faith and this passage, our faith in neither dependent nor determined by our knowledge or understanding. Likewise, the presence of Jesus Christ among us is not made manifest in our knowledge or understanding. The presence of Jesus does not need divine intervention...or a voice from heaven to be made known to us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters & Papers From Prison, New Greatly Enlarged Edition.* Edited by Eberhard Bethge. New York, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971. Page 280. Not a direct quote but very much the questions posed by Bonhoeffer to Bethge.

The presence of Jesus is NOT made known through our piety, nor does that presence reside in some big huge holy place. The presence is made known in our testimony of simple acts of respect of others. The presence is made known in our testimony of grace shared for others, and the presence of Jesus Christ is made known in our testimony of mercy and forgiveness given to others as freely as it is given to each of us. Bonhoeffer's quote, "There is meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveler," can be heard as, "Go in peace, serve the Lord."

When we think about our witness and our testimony, or we consider the call to discipleship or even Baptism itself, we often think that we MUST fully understand our faith before we can even consider following Jesus or sharing the presence of Jesus through respect, grace, and forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

My dear friend Pastor Gregory Fryer makes this comment on this understanding. He proclaimed this way in a sermon:

The Bible is a big and complex book. The doctrines of the church are distinctive and often hard to follow. The moral convictions of the church are often out-of-synch with popular ways, and it might be hard for the pastor or any old-time believer to convincingly explain those old moral convictions. We might feel rather helpless. We might believe that the ancient moral ways are good and true and lovely, but feel inadequate to justify those ways or to answer important criticisms of those ways.<sup>3</sup>

So, in our lack of knowledge or understanding we may feel inadequate and overcompensate that inadequacy with judgment...judgment of others. In other words, we may not be able to fully articulate our faith so we articulate our faith by simply pointing out the faults and sins of others to justify our faith. In turn we become blinded by our judgment and only see God in this light of judgment and this is what we reveal in our actions and our testimonies. In our judgment we exclude people and despise those who do not think what we think, believe what we believe. We quickly forget in our overcompensation that "nothing that we despise in other people is inherently absent from ourselves."<sup>4</sup> And once again I turn to the wisdom of Bonhoeffer who wrote:

"Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others, we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are."<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Today once again we hear the simplicity of God's grace in the one Word that is Jesus Christ...this grace is not rocket science, it is not difficult to understand. John simply says, Look..."Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...with these words, with his proclamation John's followers leave him and follow Jesus. There is no voice from heaven, there is no theological dissertation...we just hear John say here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. When Jesus calls his disciples he simply says, "follow me." There is no theological explanation, no dissertation or teaching, just the simple "words," "follow me," and the disciples without much

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<sup>2</sup> Van Harn, Roger E.. *The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A, Gospel Lesson: John 1:29-42. Page 484.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church New York, New York. This quote is from Pastor Fryer's homily on January 15, 2020 in preparation for Epiphany 2A.

<sup>4</sup> This quote is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and is part of an old file of quotes I gathered together during my time at seminary, I have no reference or recollection where I acquired it from.

<sup>5</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Page 172.

understanding, manifest those two words by following. Look at the sheer beauty in the simplicity of follow me. We hear in the translation today, that the disciples ask Jesus where he is staying. What they are asking Jesus is, where do you abide; live, dwell; last, endure, continue. Today we hear, “this is my body, this is my blood, given for you” and in these Words with these elements, Jesus abides; lives, dwells; lasts, endures, and continues in these words.

Today we hear the word in this proclamation, we taste the word in this Holy Meal, and Jesus lives on, he endures, but most importantly, Jesus abides, and Jesus will continue in the Word we share with others. The Word that is Jesus Christ takes away our sin, it is the same word that promises us all new life, and it is light within the darkness of this world right now. May we absolutely see HIM abiding in our words we speak and share. May we absolutely see HIM abiding in the grace and peace we take from here and share with the world. This one Word is Jesus Christ, who is the Lamb of God and who has taken away our sin...what more do we need to know?

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*