

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Are you drowning yet in this busy season? It's about this time that people start to feel a little overwhelmed. There is just so much to do this time of year. There are gifts to buy and wrap. The tree needs to be put up and the lights and ornaments need to be put on. The house needs to be decorated. The outside lights need to be set up along with the other lawn decorations. There are holiday parties to attend at work and with friends. You need to bake the cookies and make the candy. The Christmas cards need to be sent out. Plans need to be made for the holiday celebration. There's so much to do that if you aren't careful, you can get to the end of this season and lose sight of what it is all about. We can put up our decorations, make our lists, bake our treats, host our parties and if we are not paying attention miss the true Light of Christmas. While there may be some good times and great memories that are made, we can still find ourselves feel empty, lonely and depressed because we weren't focused on the true joy that God intends for us in this season.

Today, God sends the herald John the Baptist to help us keep our focus on what matters most for us throughout this season. John helps us today by focusing our attention on the true light of Christmas—Jesus our Savior. While all the eating and drinking, the laughing and partying, the buying and selling, the decorations and songs might be well and good, we don't want them to detract our attention from the true celebration of God's love for us in Jesus. Let's listen to the Baptist this morning as he directs us: ***Pay Attention to What is Most Important.***

**John 1:6-8, 19-28** *There was a man sent from God whose name was John.<sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.<sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light...<sup>19</sup> Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.<sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."<sup>21</sup> They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent<sup>25</sup> questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"<sup>26</sup> "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know.<sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

John the Baptist was clear about who he was and what his role in God's kingdom was. God gave John the Baptist a special and specific calling to be the forerunner of the Savior and to be the witness who would testify to the coming Savior. The Jewish leaders were not so sure who John was. His preaching was entirely new. He preached repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. John's message sounded a note of warning that the Messianic kingdom was at hand. People were flocking to him out in the desert quite a distance from the city of Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders needed to know what was going on and so they sent some priests and Levites to find out. This was well within their right and authority as the religious leaders of the people.

But these leaders should have known what was happening. Everything John said and did was in complete agreement with God's word. John fulfilled perfectly the prophecy of the one who would come before the Savior and be the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the hearts of God's people for the Messiah he would send. John carried out his work with complete humility and pointed people to the light that would shine into the sin darkened world. The Jewish leaders weren't concerned about that light. They were more concerned about John. They didn't ask John to talk more about the light which would shine as Christ began his work. They asked him only about himself. And with each answer they grew in their dissatisfaction.

The reality is they didn't want to know the light John preached because they felt they didn't need the light that John preached. They were familiar with all the Bible said about the forerunner to the Messiah and the Messiah himself, but they looked right past both when they came because they were focused on something else. They were focused on their own good works and their national heritage for their confidence before God. They were concerned about keeping their power and authority over the people. All of this caused them to miss the true light that God sent into the world. Even though John continued to redirect their focus off of himself to the work that he came to do which was to witness concerning the light that God was sending, they refused to see it. The forerunner and the Messiah were right in front of them and they did not know who either of them were.

But you know exactly who John is speaking about. You know Jesus. You know him to be your Savior. You know him as the one who brought the light of salvation into this sin darkened world. You know him who shed his blood on the cross to deliver you from sin and the darkness of death. You know him who gives you the light of life. You know him who is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You know that this season of Christmas is all about him. It's all about celebrating God's love in rescuing us from our sin and delivering us to the joy of eternal life. This is why we celebrate Christmas once a year.

This is such an important event for our spiritual lives that we want to bring it regularly before our eyes to continually be reminded of and refreshed by God's love for us in Jesus.

Here's the danger for us: We are in danger of knowing the Christmas story so well, that we fail to see Jesus in our celebration. We can get ourselves so frazzled that when we arrive at worship on Christmas Eve that is the first time we have to breath. We enjoy the quiet hour, smile at all the cute kids, let ourselves be taken away with the familiar songs and familiar story—but miss the deep significance of what was proclaimed not only to the shepherds but to us—this is the Christ that God promised! The externals that have become so much a part of our secular celebration have taken our focus off the much deeper spiritual celebration.

What a warning John the Baptist sounds to us: Pay attention to what is most important! To see what is most important, to understand fully not only who John was but more importantly who Jesus is and why this is so important, we need to first confess the darkness in which we were lost as sinful human people. This is why so many people in our world today don't want to celebrate the full significance of Christmas. They want the twinkling of the Christmas tree lights and the glitter of tinsel. They don't want a light who will dispel the darkness of unbelief. They don't want to have to admit that without this child who was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago we would be lost in the dark wilderness of sin to be separated from our God forever. That's not trying to be dramatic! That's the truth. To see the true light of Christmas we must first come to grips with the fact that alone we are nothing. We are sinners who are lost in the darkness of unbelief with no escape. We cannot find God much less earn favor with him.

It is when we admit that by ourselves we are nothing that we see in Jesus the Christ who is everything! God did not destroy mankind when sin entered into the world. He promised a Savior who would take the punishment we deserved and exchange that with life we don't deserve. This is the light to which John the Baptist directs our attention. This is the true light of Christmas that brings joy and peace. We don't want to get so caught up in the preparations, food, gifts and activities of this holiday season that they become light pollution that keeps us from seeing the brightness of Jesus. When we are in the complete darkness, only then do we grasp fully the brightness of his Light! Only then do we truly celebrate God's love in rescuing us from the dark dungeon of sin. Pay attention to this light as we go through this season. Make it a priority to set aside time to meditate and ponder on who you truly are by nature so that the Holy Spirit can reveal to you the bright light of salvation God brings to you.

When the Spirit reveals the true Light of Christmas in the salvation brought to us in Jesus, we can't help but let that light shine through us and be witnesses concerning it. As John the Baptist directs us to the light of Jesus for our own spiritual well-being, he also gives us a great example of how we can be modern day witnesses to this light. John didn't back away when he was challenged by the Jewish leaders. He pointed them to the prophecies of the Old Testament and proclaimed their fulfillment in Jesus. When John could have bolstered his own self-image and improved himself and his position in the eyes of these leaders, he didn't hesitate to turn the focus off of himself and direct them to Jesus. In great humility and faithfulness to his God, John confessed how unworthy he was to even loosen the sandals of the Messiah and he directed them to the light that would bring salvation.

The many parts of our secular holiday celebration not only can blind us from seeing the light of Jesus, it can dim or distinguish our witness of him. The reality is in our world today you don't have to do too many extraordinary things to witness to the Light of Jesus at Christmas. Just wishing someone a "Merry Christmas" in this world of politically correct "Happy Holidays" can be a bold witness to the light of Christ. It can give you the chance to share with others that Jesus truly is the main focus of this holiday. Instead of sending Christmas cards that only wish people the "peace of the season" or "hope for the new year," send cards that direct people to the peace that Jesus brings or the hope that Jesus offers for the new year ahead. Just these small things can be a bold witness to the light of Christ.

Might someone get mad at you for witnessing to the true light of Christmas? Yes. These Jewish leaders were not happy with John the Baptist. But they didn't like Jesus either. Both John and Jesus experienced rejection and a great deal of hostility from them. They hated both of them for exposing their hypocrisy and selfishness. We may face the same rejection and the same type of hostility for the same reason. Pointing people to the light of Jesus forces people to see in themselves the darkness of sin. It forces them to admit that they aren't as good as they thought or that they can't earn favor themselves before God. But it also gives you the opportunity to help them see the light of Jesus. Witnessing for Christ may help them to know what you know: our life—both here and in eternity—is wrapped up in our Lord and Savior Jesus. We know exactly where we are going in this life and the next because of him. This is where we find our peace and this is what provides us hope.

Pay attention to what matters most this Christmas season. Keep your attention focused on Jesus as you prepare your hearts to celebrate the light of his salvation. Pay attention to the opportunities God will give to you to witness to that light throughout this season. I guarantee that if you start looking for them, you will see them all over the place. Treasure the light of salvation God shines into your heart as we hear again of his love in sending our Savior. Pay attention to what matters most. Amen.