

Who Are You?
Sermon on John 1:6-8, 19-28 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, December 11, 2005

About this time last year, a DVD called “Stop Snitching” began making the rounds of the mean streets of Baltimore, Maryland. Like many “gangsta rap” videos, this DVD featured young men flashing cash and weapons and using lyrics laced with profanities. But this wasn’t a made-for-MTV Hollywood production; this DVD was made by actual gangsters. Produced by suspects in criminal cases, the controversial video shows street gang members threatening the lives of people who cooperate with the police to fight drugs and crime in their communities. To underscore its message, the video shows what appear to be three dead bodies on its back cover under the heading “Snitch Prevention.” “Stop Snitching” is no idle threat. Rickey Prince, a 17-year-old who witnessed a gang murder and had agreed to testify against the killer, was shot in the back of the head a few days after a prosecutor read Mr. Prince’s name aloud in a courtroom packed with observers. In October 2002, it’s reported that 36-year-old Angela Dawson, her husband and their five school-age children were killed when their home was firebombed as a retaliatory attack because they stood up to drug dealers in their East Baltimore neighborhood. Witness intimidation has become so bad in Baltimore, that one prosecutor says that in 90 percent of his cases, witnesses are afraid to testify or they lie on the stand.

In Baghdad, half a world away, the situation is little different. At the trial of Saddam Hussein, many witnesses who have agreed to testify against the former dictator have done so on the condition that their identities not be revealed for fear of retaliation. They testify concerning Saddam’s alleged brutality from behind a curtain and a phalanx of armed security guards.

The act of giving testimony has become an act of courage. To tell the truth often comes at the price of one’s life, as the example of martyrs to the faith like Joan of Arc or Dietrich

Bonhoeffer attest. Testifying to the truth may involve challenging some of the most powerful people, institutions, or beliefs in our society. Those people, institutions, and beliefs are part of what Walter Brueggemann calls a script, the narrative or story of how we understand the world. Whether our script was written by Adam Smith or Thomas Jefferson or Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud, everybody has a script. The dominant script of modern America offers us relief from every pain or inconvenience, promises that every problem can be fixed with the right technology, can be purchased with a credit card, and will be guarded by the latest weapons systems.¹

There is an alternative script to those written on Madison Avenue or Wall Street or 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. There is a script more compelling than those narrated on cable television, talk radio, or country music. That alternative script is rooted in the Bible. “The defining factor of the alternative script,” says Brueggemann, “is the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven and Earth, and whom we name as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”² That alternative script is the story of God’s dealings with his people: a story of creation and covenant, a story of slavery and salvation, a story of ruin and redemption. The script called for God finally to vindicate his people Israel by sending the Messiah, God’s anointed One, to be the savior of God’s people and the restorer of their fortunes.

The Pharisees knew the script, as did the priests and the Levites. That is why they prayed with the words of the prophet Isaiah, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence ... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence” (Isa. 64:1-2). The script called for a daring move on God’s part, for God to invade the world with his own tremendous presence. The only question was how: Some, following the prophet Micah, argued that God’s Messiah

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Living with the Elusive God,” in *The Christian Century*, November 29, 2005, 22.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

would appear at Bethlehem, while others contended that the Messiah's presence on earth would be hidden until he was suddenly revealed to his people on earth.

The script unfolded in a seemingly conventional way. We are told that "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (1:6). As a man sent from God, John was a man on a mission. His mission was to testify: "He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (1:7). It may seem unusual to testify to something like light. Light after all, is simply there and we see it; we don't think it has moral qualities like goodness or truth. Moreover, what can a man say about light that makes light any more true? Speaking of his father's art, Thomas Merton writes that "[H]is paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God's creation to bear witness for itself."³ Indeed, the light of God's creation is powerful, but it must be because it must not only enter, but also overcome the darkness. John himself "was not the light, but he came to testify to the light" (1:8).

That testimony aroused curiosity in the centers of power in Jerusalem: Was this testimony part of the script? So the religious authorities sent a committee of priests and Levites to investigate. "Who are you?" they asked (1:19). John answered by saying, "I am not the Messiah" (1:20). "What then?" they persisted. "Are you Elijah?" "I am not," said John. "Are the prophet?" "No," he said. "Then who are you?" they demanded. I rather doubt that the British rock group The Who had the Gospel of John in mind when writing their 1975 hit, "Who Are You?" but the lyrics of the chorus aptly summarize the interrogation of John the Baptist by this group of Levites and priests: Well, who are you? / I really wanna know / Tell me, who are you? / 'Cause I really wanna know. John first wanted to make clear what he was not: he was not any of the traditional figures upon whom some people placed messianic expectations.

³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1948).

If he was not the Messiah who would deliver God's people, or Elijah who would announce the Messiah's coming, or even the prophet like Moses, then who was he? "Let us have an answer," said his questioners. "Who are you?" "I am the voice," John said, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (1:23). John understood that his role was as a witness, his job was to announce, his task was to provide testimony and point the way. This is a rather different John than the John of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here is no eccentric preacher with a far-fetched wardrobe, nor a ravaging lion calling out for repentance. Here is a man who knows he is neither messiah nor prophet but witness, someone whose words and acts point beyond himself to the Word that is Truth and Light.

The question put to John is a question put to us: Who are you? Like John, we first say what we are not: I am no minister or missionary, no preacher or prophet. Then we confess that we are not worthy: I am only an accountant or a homemaker or a student or a child. But friends, we do not need official status or an advanced degree or board certification to be what we are called to be or to do what we are called to do: God calls us to be witnesses for him, to testify to the love, grace, mercy, joy, peace, and strength that we experience as a result of knowing God. We are called to prepare for God's coming into the world by making his way straight: to be a voice for justice, to be hands of compassion, to be minds that seek the truth, to be feet swift to comfort the lonely and brokenhearted.

Who are you, brothers and sisters? You are Christians, saved by God at the cross, set apart by God in your baptism, addressed by God through the Word, nourished by God at the Table. You are witnesses, called to testify to Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, so that all might believe through him.