

## **i ≠ him: I ≠ Christ**

*John 1:19-23*

If you are a follower of Jesus, you know that he gave us marching orders to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” The idea of witnessing for Jesus... can be intimidating. Feels like a lot of pressure to not screw up! And especially at Christmas time when the “oughts” and “should” kick in! We know we “ought” to be inviting unchurched friends to church... we “should” to be able to explain the real meaning of Christmas.... But it’s a lot of pressure.

Believe me...I get it! I felt it last night! I feel it every Christmas Eve. Thousands of people show up and I probably have ONE SHOT at them for the year. So much is riding on that one moment of witness...that one sermon...that one testimony. It can be overwhelming.

If you realize that the ultimate motivation for loving your neighbor is to be an effective witness for Jesus, it can seem like an overwhelming burden to ‘get it right.’ Ever felt that way? Well, I’ve got an early Christmas present for you. What if I could take off some of that pressure? That’s what we are trying to do with our Advent series in the first chapter of John’s gospel.

You might be familiar with the words of John 1; they are often recited during the Christmas season: “In the beginning was the Word, etc... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the father, full of grace and truth.” But tucked in between these famous passages are references to the most famous witness to Jesus that ever lived: John the Baptist.

How many of you have heard of a theologian named Harry Callahan? You might know him as Dirty Harry. Dirty Harry once said, famously, “A man’s got to know his limitations.” Well...John the Baptist knew his limitations. It would have been easy for him to think WAY more of himself than he ought. He was a religious rock star. After 400 years of silence from God...400 years of the Israelites praying and waiting for a word from the Lord...FINALLY, John showed up and the silence was broken.

He began preaching out in the middle of nowhere. And believe me, these were NOT seeker-sensitive sermons. He let EVERYONE have it for their rebellion, selfishness, disobedience, idolatry. And still, they thronged to him by the thousands...to listen, to repent, to be baptized. Even Jesus was baptized by John, thus putting his stamp of approval on the guy he would later describe as the GOAT; the Greatest Of All Time human beings.

But as famous as he was...even with the endorsement of Jesus... John kept his ego in check. He just kept pointing to Jesus... as he in this week’s story. John 1: 19-24.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "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?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)

I'm sure most of you know this, but "Christ" was not Jesus' last name. (And, by the way, despite what some of your dads might have uttered from time to time, "H" was not his middle initial, either!) "Christ" is a Greek word that means "anointed one." In Jewish culture, a person chosen to be king was anointed with oil by the priest. It was a symbol of God's spirit being poured out upon that person. It meant they were set aside for leadership, chosen by God, blessed with spiritual gifts and authority.

Christ is also the Greek translation for a familiar Hebrew word: "Messiah." In the Old Testament, "Messiah" referred to a future king, born in the line of King David but whose kingdom would be eternal. This messiah is mentioned in many different places. Every Christmas Eve, we begin by reciting Messianic prophecies from Isaiah 9: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And the government will be upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

At Passover, the ritual supper included prayers for the coming of Messiah. Every observant Jew looked for the arrival of the long-awaited Anointed One. And by the first century, after 400 years without a single word from the Lord...and after living under Roman oppression for 100 years...the people were LONGING for Messiah to come. They wanted a rescuer; a hero who would kick out the Romans and restore a God's kingdom on earth. The Messiah...the Christ....would be their savior. Their deliverer. Their rescuer.

The Old Testament even promised an opening act so that they would recognize him when he appeared. God promised to send someone to announce his arrival ...and, essentially, to warm up the crowd! The last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6, made that promise:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Now, Elijah was the greatest of Old Testament prophets. In fact, he didn't even die; he was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. Malachi promised that Elijah...or someone like Elijah...would return as the opening act for the Messiah.

SOOOO....when word reached Jerusalem that some wild-haired, wild-eyed guy was preaching by the river Jordan...and thousands of people were making the road trip to hear him...naturally, the religious Poohbahs sat up and took notice. Especially the Pharisees... the fundamentalists who would become

Jesus' most ardent enemies. They were particularly concerned to vet this guy and make sure he was kosher. That's what happens in today's story. These inquisitors arrive and start questioning John.

"Who are you? What gives you the right to preach this way? Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you some other prophet?" Every time, John replies the same way. Nope. Nope. Nope. (By the way, it appears he was being overly modest. Jesus would later say that John WAS, in fact, the fulfillment of that Elijah prophecy.) But in this moment, John says, humbly, "I am none of those guys. And I am most certainly NOT the Christ."

Remember Dirty Harry's advice: "A man's got to know his limitations." Clearly, John did. He's already told us, "I am not the light." In other words... he doesn't have all the answers, but Jesus does. And he told us, "I am not first." In other words, he doesn't have to set the example for everyone, but Jesus will. And now, he says clearly, "I am not the Christ. I am not the Messiah. I am not the rescuer. But Jesus is."

This may be the most important lesson that John teaches us about being a witness...a pointer to Christ. Realizing... that we are NOT the rescuers. However well-intentioned we might be, if we think WE are responsible for saving people...for rescuing people...if we take that responsibility upon ourselves, it is an unbearable burden on us...and a false hope for those we want to help.

This is important for YOU to understand about every earthly spiritual leaders. In recent years, we've watched pastors of significant churches...highly respected, persons of great influence, gifted and anointed leaders...we've watched them crash and burn. Sexual misconduct, abuse of power, financial malfeasance, suicide. Every time a pastor falls or fails in spectacular fashion, they do harm to the WHOLE church...but especially to those spiritually immature persons who place them on a Messiah pedestal.

Over my years here, I've had people say things to me like, "You are the only reason I come to this church." I know they mean that as a compliment...but in fact, it is about the worst thing you can say to me. It means you really don't understand the importance of being part of the Christian community. You really don't understand worship. It tells me that the minute I'm gone, YOU'LL be gone. And worst of all, you have placed me on a Messiah pedestal of which I am unworthy and which I cannot maintain.

I promise, I am trying my best to live a life of integrity; to care for and nurture my marriage, to deal honestly with money, to do battle with pride; to remain in accountability to Christian brothers. But if I...or any pastor...is the "only reason" you come to church...what happens when we fall or fail or stumble or disappoint...or leave? For we surely will, in some way, great or small, sooner or later. As tempting as it might be for us to receive adulation from adoring fans, it is toxic for us ...and dangerous for you. Because there is only one Messiah...one Christ...one rescuer. And I'm not that guy.

But neither are YOU! John's warning applies just as surely to every one of us, because there are times when WE take on the role of rescuer...of savior...in the lives of those we love. We not only empathize

with their problems, we personalize them! We don't just direct them to resources; we take on the responsibility for straightening them out.

I see it every week. I saw it this week. Rescuers. People who think THEY are responsible for straightening out the life of someone they love. I hear it from the wife who is desperate that her husband follow Christ and wants to save him. I hear it from the parent who is frantic about their wayward child and wants to save her. I hear it from a grandparent scared to death about the life-trajectory of their grandchild and wants to save him. Not only can we NOT save anyone...we can do more harm than good if we try.

Two weeks ago, 70 of us returned from a Thanksgiving pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I've been there ten times and every time I go, I face the unexpected. But I'd NEVER had something like this happen. We were visiting Masada, the famous mountaintop fortress near the Dead Sea where 900 Jewish rebels committed suicide rather than surrender to the Roman army.

I had already returned to the bottom by cable car when I got a call from my wife, Cyndi, who was still at the top with the remainder of our group. She said, "Phil Vance has just collapsed and they are giving him chest compressions right now." I could hardly believe my ears. Phil is a young man, a doctor, in good shape. I couldn't imagine him receiving CPR; it was a devastating piece of news! All I could do was wait until everyone rode the cable car down. Imagine my surprise, then, when Phil WALKED off of the cable car. Pale and shaken....but apparently all right.

So...here's the rest of the story. Phil had been ill. A combination of dehydration and flu. He was standing in line when he said to the man next to him, "My blood pressure's dropping; I'm going down." The man caught him and lowered him to the ground. But a woman...whom Phil would later describe as a Bulgarian weightlifter...and who had apparently received CPR training... saw Phil go down. Without checking for a pulse, she climbed on top of him and began chest compressions. As it turns out, his heart was fine...but his ribs aren't. She cracked four of them.

Phil is very gracious in talking about this eager, would-be rescuer. But as it turns out, he didn't need rescuing. At least, not that kind. Turns out her rescuing did more harm than good!

You can't save anyone. Not even those you love the most. And if you TRY to save them, you may do more harm than good. I am not the Christ. I am not the savior. I am not the rescuer. Neither are you. Whew. What a relief! So then...what ARE we? A voice! A guide. A witness. A pointer to the one who IS the Christ.

When John answered their question, he quoted Isaiah. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" What was he talking about? In the Old Testament times, there were no highways. So, when a king traveled to a new part of his realm, an ARMY would go before him: removing obstacles, filling in gullies, cutting down hillsides, building bridges. Their job was to make the way as straight, flat and easy as possible so the king could get where he wanted to go.

Our job as the voice of witness is to make the way straighter between our loved ones and the king they might not yet even know. To knock down every obstacle that would hinder the king from reaching his people. How do we do that? How do we make a “straight way?” We answer honest questions honestly. We speak words of love and kindness and support. We perform disarming acts of kindness and hospitality. We invite people into our lives and marriages and homes and churches to see what a Christ-follower lives like. Not perfect, but authentic. Most of all, we point, point, point to Jesus...who IS the Christ, the Savior, the Messiah.

That’s who we are. That’s ALL we need to be...this Christmas...and every other season. “...the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord!”