

**Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28**

A man named John was sent from God.  
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John.  
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests  
and Levites to him  
to ask him, "Who are you?"  
He admitted and did not deny it,  
but admitted, "I am not the Christ."  
So they asked him,  
"What are you then? Are you Elijah?"  
And he said, "I am not."  
"Are you the Prophet?"  
He answered, "No."  
So they said to him,  
"Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?  
What do you have to say for yourself?"  
He said:  
"I am *the voice of one crying out in the desert,*  
*'make straight the way of the Lord,'*"  
as Isaiah the prophet said."  
Some Pharisees were also sent.  
They asked him,  
"Why then do you baptize  
if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?"  
John answered them,  
"I baptize with water;  
but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,  
the one who is coming after me,  
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."  
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,  
where John was baptizing.

**Gospel Study: *Where is Jesus?***

Today we are midway through the Advent season. Traditionally the church calls this Sunday *Gaudete Sunday* meaning *rejoice* that we're halfway to the coming of Christ. But, instead of rejoicing, we often feel stressed from the holidays. I often think of the time before Christmas as the best of times and the worst of times to paraphrase Charles Dickens.

A recent study revealed that most people have ambivalent feelings about the Christmas, or holiday, season insofar as we look forward to Christmas and at the same time we can't wait until the holidays are over. I guess the challenge, the real challenge for us, is to not be so taken up with all the busy, crazy, holiday responsibilities but to be more focused on the Holy Day. Let's talk about how to shift the attention from *holiday* to *Holy Day* because there we can find a place of peace. There we can rejoice in the real reason for the season.

I think it's John the Baptist who points the way, shows the way, for us; even in this Gospel we're studying today. We're told that John came as a witness to testify to the light. It's those two words I want to focus on. First *witness*, this word is used three times in the first sentence; either witness, or it's synonym, testify, in order to emphasize this important theme throughout the whole Gospel. It's interesting that the Evangelist calls John "Witnesser" more than a "Baptizer." The Synoptic Gospels present him more as Baptizer but this fourth Evangelist sees this role of Witnesser as something that every disciple shares in. We need to pay attention to this man sent from God who models for us what we all ought to be doing, namely witnessing to each other.

Let me just pause on that note and bring it right to home. One of the greatest concerns that I hear from so many good people is about our family and friends who no longer go to church. Somehow that pain is felt a little more acutely in this Holy season of Christmas when we know that the very purpose of our coming into this world is to be one with the Lord our Savior, Jesus Christ. How do we help these children, grandchildren, friends and coworkers come to church besides asking them for this kind of Christmas gift? The key, or the advice that John the Baptist would give us, is to witness to them. To witness is not to preach or teach or stand above them in any way but simply to share what you have seen and what you have experienced yourself in your life with the Lord. Where have you experienced Jesus?

That question leads to the second point and the second keyword in this prologue or introduction to John's Gospel. John [the Baptizer] came to give witness to the light. The word light is used three times, just like the word witness is used three times, in this first sentence. The purpose for this emphasis is to bring home that this is who Jesus is; the Light of the World. He says this time and again. This is the theme of John's Gospel. In fact, the preceding verse in the prologue said of Jesus, "He came as a light in the world of darkness but the darkness did not put out the light."

This is an interesting point historically that many of you might already be aware of. Do you know how it came to be that we celebrated Jesus' nativity on December 25th? I presume there is no sure way of telling when Jesus actually was born. In the early days of Christianity, in Rome, the Romans believed in many gods, most especially the god of the Sun. They determined that the winter solstice was December 25 (that we commemorate on December 21) when the Sun was farthest from them in the southern sky and so the nights were longest and the days were darkest and coldest. It was on that day of winter solstice, December 25, that they celebrated the pagan feast of the birth of the Sun because from then on it grew and shared its lights more and more in the world.

The Christian said, 'This is a perfect analogy and opportunity for us to celebrate the birth of the Son of God who comes to share His light into a world filled with darkness and coldness. He is

that source of all energy and life.’ It became a wonderful occasion in commemoration of Jesus’ birth.

That’s an interesting fact, isn’t it? It’s also interesting that Jesus, as the Son of God, and like the Sun in the sky, is ever present to us, though there are many times where His presence is not always felt, or the warmth of His love is not always experienced; especially if you live in Cincinnati [or Chicago] during the winter months. Often times in our lives we experience the clouds of difficulty and the winter season of suffering. Nevertheless, we trust that God is ever present to us. We celebrate that omni-presence in Jesus. When Jesus came to us at Christmas, although He physically returned to Heaven, He spiritually is present for all time; to all people; in all situations.

Going back to John the Baptist, the Jewish priests and Levites from Jerusalem were very curious about this Holy man of God because he drew quite a number of people and they asked him, “Who are you?”

They almost answer their own question, “Are you the Messiah?”

John says, “No, not the Messiah.”

“Are you Elijah?”

“No, I’m not Elijah.”

“Are you one of the prophets?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not one of the prophets.”

Here’s a hint of the three expectations most Jewish people had in the day of Christ. They expected and awaited the coming of a Messiah, the one that would come, they thought (this is an important point as I’ll reflect on later) would come as a mighty warrior or royal king that would lead them to overthrow the Roman government and liberate them to be a nation of their own, the chosen people. They also expected the return of Elijah. Remember Elijah the great prophet of the Old Testament who, in his last days, was then taken up in a fiery chariot into Heaven? We have the African American spiritual we sing: *Swing low, Sweet chariot, Coming forth to carry me home*. The Jewish people believed that Elijah would then return before the end of time, as prophesied by the prophet Malachi. Even to this day, when they celebrate the Seder meal at Passover, Orthodox Jews will set an empty chair for Elijah and pray that he may reappear to announce the coming of the Messiah. Interesting.

The Jews also expected, as the priest hinted at when he asked John, that a prophet would come. This prophet is very specifically the prophet that Moses spoke of who would be a prophet like himself to lead the people into the promised land. They asked John, “Are you any one of these key figures?” John denies, time and again, “I am not any of these.” It’s as though he’s saying: *Don’t look at me. I’m not here to even talk about myself*. He says, “I am here to simply introduce the one who is to come.” That’s the beauty of John isn’t it? The humility of that man who said, “I

must grow less. He must increase, I must decrease.” This is what it means to give an effective witness.

Who are the people who witness to us effectively? I bet they are always humble people. I think especially of Cardinal Bernardin; a humble man of God. The more humble you are, the louder your voice carries.

Mother Teresa, so humble. Her witness carries over cultures and continents. These are the humble people the Lord will use. It isn't how loud you speak, or what position you have, but in effect almost the opposite. If we could just be humble in the way we live, our actions would speak louder than our words. This is what it means to witness.

These people come to John and they say, “Well, who in the world are you?” And John says, quoting Isaiah the prophet, “I am a voice in the desert.” Remember he's in the desert crying out: “Make straight the way of the Lord.” I love that line as John must've identified it, and reflected on it, and meditated on it, time and again and made it part of his own. Is there any line in Scripture that you have made your own? If you had to quote any verse of the Bible that would describe your life what would you quote? What would you identify with? This is part of where we're being led to reflect on and John saw himself simply as one who would be a small voice.

One thing that spoke a lot to me—because I'm before a microphone often—is I like to see myself as a *micro* phone. Micro means small, phone means voice. I am a small voice for God to speak; just an instrument. But it would only work if the power switch is on and I always pray, as I do here today, that God would simply use my voice that you would hear His Word and that it would be amplified only by His Holy Spirit to make it effective. As Mother Teresa taught us, we're all just instruments. I love her line: *I'm just a little pencil in the fingers of God*. Isn't that something? I often think that if I'm a little pencil, God better have a big eraser.

This phrase and quote from Isaiah the prophet that John has assimilated and integrated into himself “a voice that says prepare the way of the Lord” takes on an interesting meaning if we can appreciate the time in which he's speaking. When kings planned to visit a certain remote part of their village, or kingdom, they would always send an advance man ahead of them and he would tell the people to get the roads ready. Remember, all the roads were dirt roads; very few were paved except for the Roman roads, but John's speaking in Israel far from that kind of sophisticated travel way. The advance man would say, *Get the road ready. Fill in the potholes*. He also would make the special arrangements to be sure the proper protocol was kept. John was such a spokesman saying: *This is what Jesus wants, turn away from your sins. Then the Lord will come in*. Isn't that wonderful? *Clear him a straight path*. To me I think of your desk. It means getting the clutter out. Isn't that the special challenge of these holidays? We've got to clear some space for the Lord to come into our hearts. But, that requires some discipline; clearing away the peripheral matters.

The last question that concerns the Pharisees is they want to know: Why is John baptizing? What does this mean? John in effect says, ‘I baptize as a way of purifying, of washing away all this sin.’ It's like a dramatization. Then he says something and I want to really spotlight, highlight this line, as this is the real challenge for us today. He says to the people gathered there before

him, “There is one among you whom you do not recognize. He is the one.” In effect, *He is the one you are waiting for*. He is the one you’re expecting. Ironically, He is the one you are not recognizing.

Would that not be true of the Lord in our midst today? And at Christmas time don’t we celebrate not only Christ coming 2,000 years ago, but we appreciate and celebrate that He is already here among us? What do we use this Advent season of preparation for? To clear out the clutter and set our sight on the ways the Lord is present among us? We don’t easily see it, or say it, or celebrate it. In fact, someone was telling me: “Think of all the people celebrating Christmas today and how many fail to really celebrate Christ.” No wonder we are so glad to get over the holidays because they’re just holidays they’re not Holy Days. When you experience the Holy, there’s something of a drawing power that wants to stay; there’s some beauty there.

If these are Holy days, then we want to be right where we are. How do we make them Holy but to recognize the Holy One? I’d like to share with you where this came home to me. I was out buying some gifts for some of my nephews and nieces and I bought this children’s book for my Godson titled *Can You Find Jesus?* It’s not unlike the children’s book *Where’s Waldo?* Have you seen that? It’s such a clever book. Every page, like the cover, is crowded with all these people in a flurry of activity and of course the question the child will ask is: Can you find Jesus there?

It’s presumed that they will have a parent or grandparent (or in my case Godparent) who can help the child discover Jesus. It is not only discovering Jesus; each chapter of the book covers a different part of Jesus’ life. From birth to death and resurrection, it takes you through the different ways Jesus is present. To help the child, the artist has beautifully painted or pictured different signs—classical, traditional signs—of Jesus: an angel, a star, lights. You can see in this picture the light, a dove in the spirit, a crown or a cross. These are all signs of Jesus’ presence and it’s the guiding voice of the adult that brings it all to light for the child. When I first looked at this cover and the crowded picture and the question *Can You Find Jesus?* I thought, “This is just like my life.” My life gets so busy, and I see so many people, that I have a hard time answering the question. I keep asking, *Can’t I find Jesus?*

Certainly this is the challenge of the Advent season and this is the question and challenge and witness of John the Baptist. We all need a guide like John who will ask the right questions, point us in the right direction, and teach us how to read the proper signs. There are a few more suggestions I’d like to draw from reading this book. Now I’m wondering if I bought this book for my nephew or for me? I don’t know. It’s funny how children’s books can teach you so much can’t they? Maybe that’s how we need to approach this very solemn feast of Jesus’ Nativity, as a child. Certainly there’s a lesson here that Jesus came as a child.

The first lesson I will draw from this is that we need to believe, just as John the Baptist said, Jesus is already among us. In the season we say He is Emmanuel. That title means: God is with us. It means further that there is no time and no situation in which the Lord is not truly present in our life. Obviously and naturally, we will not always feel the warmth of his presence, the light of his guidance, or the positive experience of our faith. Regardless of what page or chapter we are on in our life, whether it be a sad time or a happy time, can you believe that the Lord is right

there somewhere with you? It may seem like a small point, but it actually means everything for this season.

I believe we must come to an Advent season of preparation. We must begin to see that Jesus is already among us and we must invite people to see it and experience it, but, that's not going to happen until we have the Lord within ourselves. Then our hearts become like that manger; that humble place where we can hold the Lord and share the Lord with those who come in contact with us. I ask the question: Can you believe Jesus is among you? Can you go home and believe Jesus is at home with you? Can you sit across the table tonight with those whom you share meals or with those whom you talk to on the phone and believe Christ is with you? This is what will lead us truly to Bethlehem, which raises the second question, or suggestion.

Once we believe the Lord is among us, then where do we find Him? Obviously we need to look for the Lord; perhaps with the wonder of a child that would look in these pages. Perhaps even this would suggest that to find Jesus we need to clear the clutter. I don't think we can possibly hear God speak unless we have found someplace in space for solitude and silence. Would you agree? I hope I could call us to, as certainly John did, that place in the desert. Where's our desert place? That place where we have to go apart to find the Lord. I believe it's only in silence where we can hear ourselves talk and the Lord speak. Herman Melville, the popular author once said, "All profound things are preceded by, and attended by silence." Silence is golden. The Spirit whispers to our soul. Perhaps one way to really enter into the Advent season is to find those places of quiet where we can quietly pray and ask Jesus: *Where are you in my life right now? How are you coming to me? How are you speaking to me?*

We should never forget this great irony, or if you will, paradox, that most of the Jewish people at the time Christ came were expecting the Messiah to come. However most of them also missed Him in His coming. Why? We need to ask ourselves today. One reason, because there was no room for Him in the inn. With us, if Jesus came today, and He does, does He find any room in our schedules, in our day, with our time? I often wonder who would be there if we announced that Jesus Christ is coming to Synergy Stadium. How many of us would say we just don't have the time? We need to take the time.

Another reason many people missed Jesus was that they expected a more powerful expression or incarnation of the Messiah. He came as a humble baby in a place outside the city of David in Bethlehem. To me there's a hint of something very important to it that Jesus often, if not always, comes in subtle, humble, gentle ways. Maybe that's why we often overlook Him because the glitz and glitter of society and commercialism and the blare and the noise of commercialism drowns out that subtle, gentle voice of the Lord.

The last thing is that, just like on this book, there are certain signs. Can you point out the signs of Jesus' presence? If we want to really experience the Lord in the season, which the Lord invites all of us to this experience, what are those signs that indicate His presence? Are there not signs wherever we find love? Wherever we find joy? Wherever you find peace? Wherever you find goodness? Wherever you find humility? Wherever you find truths?

Fr. Jim Willig Gospel Study – *Where is Jesus?*

Wherever you find whatever is good, there is God. The good news is, the Messiah is among us. How blessed are the eyes that see, the ears that hear, and the heart to believe and receive our Savior. Amen.