

John 1:6-8,19-28. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Praise the Lord for his messengers of light.

- 1. His light has reached our hearts and lives.***
- 2. His light has been placed into our hands.***

A messenger of light appeared in the night sky and the shepherds were filled with both joy and terror. In a flash the dark of night was replaced by a bright and holy light as an angel appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them. But the angel had an important message and so the angel beckoned these poor shepherds to listen to them; telling them not to be afraid. It had been over 400 years since God had spoken directly to his people through the prophets, 400 years since the prophet Malachi had uttered words of prophecy and promise from God. But an ember of hope and glimmer of a promise given long ago had been preserved and on that night it all was suddenly fanned into an undeniable flame. A messenger of heavenly light had appeared, and then a great company of angels together chased away the darkness in more ways than one as they announced the good news of God's faithful grace. ***"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests!"*** The Savior promised long ago had finally come. The shepherds hurried on their way to that manger and they saw lying in the hay the Light of the World. This was the one who would rescue us all from the darkness of sin and death, and his tiny fragile frame was wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The very Son of God was born into the darkness of our world, to give us peace, to give us eternal light and life.

The light of the world had come and upon the angels announcement and the joy that came from faith in God's promise those ordinary shepherds had become the messengers of this extraordinary light. These humble shepherds were joyously thrust into the role of messengers as they went forth and gladly spread the word concerning what had been told

them about this child. And the warm glow of this good news slowly spread throughout the land, and throughout the world.

About 30 years after that bright night in Bethlehem the time had come for another messenger of light. And so this is how John the Evangelist writes about John the Baptist. ⁶ ***There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.*** John the Baptist was not the light, but he served an important role, as important as the shepherds and the angels before him. He was to testify concerning that light, ***so that through him all men might believe.***

As the shepherds shared this message so would John. As God had brought peace and joy and hope to the people through the shepherds he would do the same through John. John would call people to see our need for a Savior, he would expose our sinfulness, sound the alarm to repent, but he would also announce the good news of salvation through the Lamb of God. He was a humble messenger with a message that was extraordinary because it pointed to the Savior, the Lamb of God, the Light of the World. John would prepare the way for Jesus. He would baptize and teach and gain disciples not for his own glory, but so that Christ Jesus might be glorified. A time would come when John would encourage all of his disciples to follow Jesus. John pointed people to Christ. John was not the light, but he was a messenger, a bringer of light. For this is how God how chosen to bring his light of faith and hope to the world; through his messengers, from person to person.

If someone were to ask you, “Why are you saved?” how would you answer? Looking at the Holy Scriptures you could answer in a variety of ways and be right. You could say, “I am saved because, before the beginning of time, God chose to save me.” Or you could say, “God moved time and space to bring to the font. There, the Holy Spirit gave me new birth through water and the Word”. You could also answer, “I am saved because God’s own Son, Jesus Christ, redeemed me from my sin by his death upon the cross.” Or you could say, “I am saved because, throughout my life, God has graciously sent his believers who lovingly encouraged and corrected me with the Word, so that my faith might be nurtured and preserved.”

Theologians sometimes call this last example the ministerial cause of the salvation. God is the primary cause of salvation. His great love for us is ultimately why you and I are saved. But in his love he has given us his saving message and that message reaches our hearts and our lives only because someone has brought that message to us. This is the ministerial cause. Christians bearing the Word of God, the message of Jesus Christ, brought light and life to our hearts, and we can do the same.

John was sent to prepare the people for the light of the world had come at Christmas and that light was about to be revealed so clearly when Jesus began to preach, teach, and perform miracles. The light of the world was there even in the darkness of Good Friday as his life was extinguished, he died for our sins, but then that light burst forth in glorious splendor on Easter morning when the tomb was empty and death and sin had been crushed and defeated. The light has come into this world, but that light has to be proclaimed and shared. It has to be shared person to person so that the light can pierce and shatter our personal darkness. It has to be shared so that you and I and others might be rescued from stumbling

about in sin, and ignorance, and unbelief. That light has to be directed and focus into our lives so that you and I might know and believe that our sins are forgiven and that we are right with God through Jesus Christ alone. If that light had not been shared, the light of Christ would still be a marvelous light, but it would be in a far off place, in a far off time, and we, we would still be lost in the darkness of sin. We would still be doomed to live lives overcast by sin and sorrow and die and then suffer eternally for our many mistakes and sins.

The light of the gospel must be shared. It must be passed on so that this light does not go out. Take for example the lights on a Christmas tree, if a light goes out, if a strand get unplugged, what happens to the rest of the lights. They go dark. Power has to be passed on, the circuit has to be complete, the light must be shared. Even more so the light of Christ needs to be shared, it needs to be passed down from person to person, from generation to generation. There is an old adage that says that we are always just one generation away from losing the gospel. The gospel must be shared. The light of the gospel has reached our hearts and minds because of God's goodness and grace. The light of the gospel has been placed into our hands so that this light might be shared with others.

Paul makes this somewhat obvious but nevertheless important point when he writes to the Romans. ***"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*** How beautiful were the feet of those shepherds as they sped with joy from the manger bed to place after place that wonderful night. How beautiful the feet of John as he stood in the wilderness and proclaimed a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. How beautiful the feet of John as he stood in the Jordan and baptized the people with water and pointed them to Jesus who would wash their sins away. In the same way: how beautiful the feet of parents, or a friend, or a pastor, or a spouse who brought the light of Christ into our lives. How beautiful the feet of little children who proudly bring that light of Christ to their moms and dads, brothers and sisters, when they share stories that they learned in Sunday school or songs that they learned at church. What a beautiful and blessed thing it is when believers share the message of salvation, share the light of Christ, as they make sure the torch of the gospel is passed to the next generation of souls. What a wonderful thing it is when believers pass the torch of the gospel by sharing the good news of Jesus with those around them.

God is the primary cause of our salvation. In his love sent Jesus and God in his love also sent us people that have shared with us the message of Jesus. And because God loved you and wanted you to be his own that light was never snuffed out, but instead God saw to it that this light of Christ traveled from messenger to messenger, down from the shepherds to John, from the disciples to the people of that first century world, from father to child, mother to daughter, from believer to unbeliever, down through the centuries, until that light finally reached your heart and mind. And God wants you to share that message with those in your lives. He wants us to be light bringers, torch bearers of the gospel, passing it down to our children and to our family and friends, relatives and neighbors, because Jesus is the light that all of us in this dark and cold and sinful world so desperately need.

We praise God that the light of the gospel has reached our hearts and has been placed into our hands. But there will always be those that try to knock that light out of our hands. There will always be those that try to snuff out that light that we hold. There will always be those who try to prevent us from sharing that message of Jesus. Whether it is our sinful flesh, the devil, or the world around us, there will be these forces of evil that will work to prevent that light from being shared.

After all, it even happened with John. John had been sent from God in fulfillment of a specific Old Testament promise. But there were those from the big city of Jerusalem, who were not too keen on what was going on with John so they sent out some people to the small town of Bethany to go and talk to John. Some of those who were sent out by the Pharisees, not only asked John who he was, but they basically asked him, *“Who do you think you are?”* ***If you are not Elijah, if you are not the Christ, why do you baptize? How dare you?! Who do you think you are?***

If they asked this about John who was foretold and specifically sent by God, people will certainly say that about me. That’s our fear, many times, isn’t it? We are afraid. We pause; we hesitate, to share the light of Christ, because we are afraid of those who might confront us in a similar way. *“Who do you think you are?”* You fear that your neighbor might say, *“I know you, I know what you have done, I know the trouble that we got into together as kids.”* There is even voice inside of our very own selves that even says, *“Who do you think you are?”* I can’t share that message with my kids, I don’t know enough. I am not capable enough. I am too sinful, too flawed, and my kids know that too well. The devil and this evil world even work on children to knock that light out of their hands. Especially as they grow older these forces of evil attack that simple faith and a child who gladly sang songs about his Savior and talked to his parents about Jesus or her friends about her Savior when he or she was younger, now that child is reluctant, afraid, indifferent, or too embarrassed to sing or say anything.

The forces of evil will do everything in their power to knock that light out of our hands, but with God’s help he will not let them. Instead our God is faithful and he is with us. He will guard and shield us with his presence. He will send us the fire of his Spirit and will rekindle our faith day after day. He will feed our faith with his word and sacraments, he will warm our hearts with his love so that we will hold on to and share this saving message. The forces of evil will try to plunge us into different levels of despair and embarrassment, but our God will lift us up. He will be there to strengthen us as we fight off those temptations. He will light up our lives and make us to shine as his light in this dark world. He will light up our lives and make us reflect his glory. For we have the light of Christ. We have been given this message. You may not have been specifically called and sent by God to be a prophet like John the Baptist was, but each one of us is part of that universal priesthood of believers that Peter refers to when he writes, ***9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).***

God has brought that light into our lives. Thanks be to God! May God help us hold onto that light and may he help us share that light with others!