



Sermon – December 12, 2021
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

John 1:6 – 8, 15 – 18, 32 - 34
Malachi 3:1

As you grab your seats, let me invite you to open your Bibles again with me to John chapter 1. We're going to be in verse 6 this morning as we come back to this Christmas story. And if you're a guest with us for the first time, whether in the room or watching online, welcome home. We come to God's word each week longing for His Spirit to change us. And what I want you to know before the message even begins is that during the response time today, I'm going to invite you to come and join me at the front at the steps to pray. As you know over the last few weeks, we have been filling out and praying over these cards. There are some still in the seat back in front of you if you haven't had a chance to fill one out yet. We've been placing names on these cards praying that God would reach the names on these cards, the people behind these names, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ this Christmas season. And I want to take time to intentionally pray over those names together at the conclusion of the service, at the conclusion of the message. So be readying your heart for that even now.

So during this Advent season, we've been working our way through John chapter 1. And at the start of John's gospel, he gives us picture after picture of who Jesus is. We started with the Lamb of God. Then last week we talked about the Word of God. And this week, we're going to focus our attention on the picture of the image of God. And I want you to see the way that the text begins starting in verse 6 of chapter 1.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

Let's pray together.

Father, even now as we hear those 10:02 alarms going off in our midst, God, we are praying for laborers. We are praying for You to raise us up and send us out to use us to be the kind of witnesses that we see in the life of John here today. And I pray if there are people that are coming here this morning broken, hurting, discouraged, and struggling, Lord, that You would

meet them in the valley of their sorrow. And that You would replace that sorrow with joy, with hope, and with peace that can only be found through Jesus Christ. And we pray these things in His name. Amen.

So it was a normal Friday night shift for Kiana Parsons Perez. She had been working at Mayfield Consumer Products for quite a bit of time and she always knew that Christmas was crunchtime. Because as a candle manufacturing plant, the holiday rush was upon them. They were working nearly 24 hours a day. And it just felt like a totally normal shift this past Friday night until a gust of wind changed everything for her and the over 100 people in that candlemaking factory in Mayfield, Kentucky. Maybe you've seen the stories or heard the reports of the devastating tornadoes that ravaged that region. And she felt that gust of wind that she was huddled around with dozens of her other coworkers in the storm shelter of that place. And she had that sensation happen. One witness that was there said, when the tornado approached it sounded like death was coming towards us. Her ears began to pop. And all of the sudden, the building began to shake until next thing she knew, the entire structure had collapsed down upon her. She was covered by 5' of rubble, unable to move, struck in the head, her heads were pinned under something. She had no way of escape. And not knowing what else to do, she called 911 to make a report. And then after that, she decided to use her phone to go onto Facebook Live and to share what was going on with the world around her. Because she was hoping that the more people knew, the better chance that they could have to get help. And so here she was, crying out in the darkness, bearing testimony about what had taken place, being a witness to what had occurred, proclaiming that truth out from the darkness in hopes that it would help to bring about deliverance. That's the power of a witness, isn't it? A witness can speak about their experience in a way that can galvanize people to action. They recount the truth in hopes of rescue. They tell the truth in hopes of deliverance. And isn't that exactly what we see John, the writer of this gospel, speaking about when he talks about this man John the Baptist. The power of witness. That here comes one who steps into the darkness, steps into the wilderness, and declares the truth about God for the sake of witness that might bring about rescue and redemption. John 1 starts in the way that many of the gospels do. When they begin the Christmas story, they turn their attention to John the Baptist. But what we find here is that John 1 doesn't begin with John the Baptist, it centers on Jesus until we get to this point in verse 6. And then it steps away to talk about this messenger, this one who would point ahead to Him. The focus doesn't shift to John. Instead it focuses on John's witness which centers on Jesus. And as we look at this text this morning, here's what we're going to notice. When we dive into John 1, if we want to embrace the Christmas story this season, then this passage shows us two realities that we need to live out in our life. It tells us that we need to believe the witness of God and behold the image of God.

So let's start back here with the text now in verse 6 where we see this idea of the call to believe the witness of God this Christmas. It says there, there was a man sent from God whose name was John. So while every one of the gospels starts with the story of John the Baptist, John's gospel is different. Because it focuses less on the moments of his story and more on the mission of his witness. It's explaining why it is that he came. And what we're going to find as we look through verses 6 through 8 when it speaks about this witness of God is it's going to answer for us 3 important questions this morning. And here's the first one back in verse 6. Who is this witness? Well, it tells us there two things about him. That this man was sent from God and his name was John. We know from both this text and from the rest of the New Testament a number

of things about this witness, John the Baptist. If you were to look at the book of Matthew or Luke and its recounting of the Christmas story, we learn that he is a relative of Jesus. That he's slightly older. And we know he's an unusual fellow, don't we? Dressed in camels hair. Eating locusts and honey. Living in the wilderness. It sounds like he'd fit right in in Austin, don't you think? He's doing his part to keep Israel weird. But this one comes. This long awaited one. And I want you to see on the screens why it is that people were flocking to him. It's because they remembered a promise that comes from Malachi chapter 3, in verse 1. There had been silence from God for nearly 400 years since the days of Malachi. But Malachi made a promise in chapter 3 in verse 1 that says this:

¹Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

They have been waiting for this moment. Anticipating this messenger. And now they go out into the wilderness to see this man because they know, as verse 6 tells us, he has been sent from God. You see that word sent there. It means to, to send out with a purpose, to take forward a message, to carry out a task from the one who has sent them. And who has sent this one? It's God Himself. Which leads us to the second question we see in this text beginning in verse 7. Why did John the Baptist come? Why did Jesus send him? Look at the answer there in verse 7. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light. So we'll see multiple times in the passage today the use of this term, witness. John's gospel loves the word, witness. It shows up over and over again. More than all of the other, it's used more often in this book than any other book of the New Testament. And there are 10, around 10 separate times in his gospel where he speaks about John the Baptist serving as a witness for Jesus. And what John the Baptist was doing was the exact same thing that Kiana Perez Parsons was doing from the rubble of that building. Speaking from personal experience to contribute corroborating evidence to build a case. She was showing the world what had taken place there for a cry for help. And now John the Baptist is showing the world the condition of our brokenness and our sin to show us our need of salvation. That's the testimony. That's the witness that he brings. And if you look down a bit further in John chapter 1, look with me at verse 32. I just want you to see one example of the way that John brings this witness forward when he speaks about the baptism of Jesus and how it confirms that He's the Christ of Christmas. Here's what verse 32 says:

³²And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him. ³³I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴And I have seen and borne witness that this is the Son of God."

There's his testimony. He says, the one upon whom the Spirit of God falls is a demonstration that one is the Son of God. He is making known to the people around him through his witness. And that's why I want you to look back at verse 7 with me and see on your page or your screen that word, witness. Because that word carries additional significance in the original language. It's not just a witness as we know it, like one in a court case who gives testimony. The word in the original language also is the foundation for the term we have in our day and age of a martyr. Not just a witness, but a martyr. Someone who is willing to give that testimony, stand by that testimony, stand on the truth that they know even if it costs them everything. And we know

that's exactly what happened to John the Baptist, right? Because we learn later in the Gospels that because of the testimony of his faith he is beheaded for the sake of the name of the one that he is called to declare. And what's the significance of that? He was so committed to his testimony that he was willing to lose his life in order to proclaim the Gospel. That's a Gospel courage this world cannot explain. I just have to wonder this Christmas season, are you and I filled with that same kind of courage to witness? This time of year, our boys and I love to watch the Charlie Brown Christmas story. And I don't know which one of your characters is your favorite, maybe it's Charlie Brown himself or Snoopy. But one of them that always grabs my attention is Linus. Remember him? What's he always carrying around with him? He's got that blanket; that security blanket. And people make fun of him for it. People will try to take it away from him. But there's something that happens in that, that story that you might have never noticed before. When Charlie Brown asks for someone to explain the purpose of Christmas, the person you would probably least expect to step on stage is Linus. He's timid, he's fearful, he's uncertain, and yet he walks to center stage carrying that security blanket with him, and what does he do? He begins to read from Luke chapter 2. That same passage we read this morning when our call to worship. And when he gets to the part we read today where the angels speak and say, "Fear not." Have you ever noticed what happens? At that exact moment he says, fear not, he drops the blanket. Because the fear has been overcome by courage. The uncertainty has been overcome by an unrelenting commitment to witness to the truth of the Christmas story. And that picture we see on the screen is the same picture we see with John and it's precisely what this text is calling us to. To bear witness to the light. To do it without wavering or fear.

And that sets the stage for the third question we see right here in the text, which is to come back to verse 7, and in the middle of the verse, answer the question, what is the purpose of John's witness. Look at the end of the verse. That all might believe through him. The reason he bears witness is not to bring the focus on himself, but to put the focus on Jesus. To call people to belief. This is the first time the word believe has shown up in John's gospel. But it's one of his favorite words. If you were to go through the whole writings of John, he uses it over 100 times, way more than the other Gospels combined. It's this picture of putting your faith in something, putting your deepest trust and hope in something. He is saying the reason for the witness is for the sake of salvation, for trust, for belief, for putting your faith in Jesus. Which is why it's so important that you notice the word that's sandwiched in there, all. You see that word? All might believe. Whether you're in the room this morning or you're catching this by video, what this message is reminding us of is that there is no one that is too far gone for the Gospel. This message is for everyone. It doesn't matter the depth of your sin. It doesn't matter the depth of your shame. It doesn't matter the depth of your guilt. Jesus is enough even for you. And if you will turn from that sin and cling to Christ as your only hope of deliverance, then this witness is for you. It's one of the reasons why we have spent the last few weeks praying for these harvest cards. They're out there in that chicken wire display and if you haven't written out a card, I want to challenge you to do that today and bring it to the front as we come to pray after this message. Because we desire that all believe. And I want you to notice the end of this verse, the last phrase, how that happens. It tells us. Through Him. In other words, through John. Through his faithful witness he wanted all to believe. And that transfers to us today. That through our faithful witness perhaps someone may come to know Jesus. You know, last year during the Christmas season, we did something similar to this with these prayer cards. And I got a text right before Christmas day from one of our church members. I want you to hear what he said to me. He said, "I had a friend that was a practicing Buddhist. He was raised Catholic and fell away

from religion. I've been witnessing to him for over 5 years. He was my prayer request for Christmas at church on my card. And this morning he told me he accepted Jesus as his Savior. My Christmas is now complete." Now I don't know what kind of stories the Lord is going to work this year, but I'd love to hear about them as He works. I just was talking to a church member this morning who the name that their family wrote down on their card, this person and their extended family hadn't stepped foot in their house in about 5 years. And the first week after that card their name was written on it, they reached out and came over to spend time with them. Maybe the doors opening up. The name I have right here on my card, I invited him to come to our Behold the Lamb concert tonight. He said yes and he's coming! He reached out to me asking for us to grab breakfast later this week. And I'm praying that God will open doors where we can talk about the Gospel. And as we come here to pray, we want to lift up these cards. Why? Because of what John is reminding us of here. That our witness is for the sake that all might believe in the Gospel.

So we notice here in verses 6 through 8 that the first call we see in this text is this Christmas we should believe the witness of God. But I want you to notice one more part of this passage. We're going to slide back down to verse 15 a little later on in this chapter where John's gospel picks up the story of John the Baptist again. And the second thing I want you to notice here is he calls us to behold the image of God this Christmas. So here's how he says it starting down in verse 15.

¹⁵(John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth come through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

If we were to go into a courtroom situation, there is tremendous power in the testimony of a witness. See, a witness is powerful but an image is priceless. A witness helps you to see things through someone else's eyes, an image enables you to see them through your own eyes. In fact, as we started this morning, I began to speak about the testimony of this woman, Kiana, if you haven't seen or known anything about these tornadoes that devastated the Midwest, you got a glimpse of it through her eyes as I recounted that story. But that same tornado that passed through Mayfield, Kentucky stretch for over 200 miles of devastation. There've only been 15 storms of tornadoes in US history that have produced over 100 deaths and this may add a 16th. Have you seen the images? The pictures and the video? See, testimony is powerful but images are priceless. That's why I want you to just see a short glimpse of the damage in Mayfield, Kentucky up here on the screens right now with this video. Notice what it looks like. The epicenter of the devastation. I've never been to that town before even though I lived in Kentucky. I've heard of it. I've not seen it with my own eyes until just this week. But when we see that reality, when we see the devastation, when we see the rubble, there's something that happens in us. There's a power in an image that when we see something more clearly, it causes us to respond more fully. So when you see that devastation it makes you want to respond in compassion, in outreach and support. And when we get to John 1:15 through 18, here's what we find. The Gospel speaks about Jesus as the image of God and in the same way as that image provokes you more fully to a response to that city facing that devastation, John is reminding us that the same thing happens when we see Jesus as the image of God. When we see God more

clearly, we will commit to following Him more fully. And as we see this theme of the image of God playing out here, there are several aspects of that that enables us to see more clearly about God. And here's what I want you to notice back in verse 15. At Christmas the image of God reveals the greatness of God. That's why verse 15, John is comparing himself to Jesus. And he says, John bore witness about him and cried out, this is the one of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me because he was before me. You see in that culture, significance was based on superiority. Whoever became first was the more significance. And you would think that that would be John the Baptist in this case. Born before Jesus, the messenger that the people of God have waited hundreds of years for, and yet John himself recognizes the greatness of God that is on display in the image of God, Jesus himself. The messenger is not greater than the Messiah.

But notice as we go on in verse 16 we also see at Christmas the image of God reveals the grace of God. That's why it says there, for from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. This picture of fullness, this is the only time John uses this term in the Gospel. It means a sense of completeness, of totality. He is saying that all that is encompassed and what it means to be God is encompassed in Jesus. There is a full reservoir of grace available to us in Christ. And just think about the image you've seen over the last few months on Highway 6 on the south part of College Station. They're building that new water tower. You've seen that going up? So they've been building at the base and they finally had to elevate it to the top of that pedestal and as that's completed, it will be filled with a reservoir of water that can provide water for the surrounding homes. It's designed to provide a seemingly neverending supply of the water that they need for the moment. When it speaks here of fullness, that's the image of the reservoir of God's grace that it is showing us that is true for us in Jesus Christ. Never ending. Never stopping. And what happens is He provides for us living waters to the surrounding needs of our hearts. And how does he do it there? You see it right there in verse 16 at the end of it when it says that we have all received grace upon grace. It's an unusual phrase, grace upon grace. This is the only time it shows up in the New Testament in this way. What does it mean? Well, of course we know that at salvation we receive the grace of God in full. He takes our heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. He takes away our sin. He gives us His righteousness. He pours out His grace, His unmerited favor, in our life. And yet John is giving us this picture that even though He has given us grace once and for all at salvation, that He's not done pouring out His grace. He gives us grace upon grace. And isn't that exactly what we need this Christmas season? There may be some of you that are limping in here wrestling with deep sorrows, hidden sin, overwhelming grief, unshakeable problems. And what this verse reminds us of is that even if it seems like every one around you is filled with joy and you alone are struggling, here's what happens as the image of God, Jesus, meets problem upon problem in your life with grace upon grace. He meets sin upon sin with grace upon grace. He meets sorrow upon sorrow with grace upon grace. He meets suffering upon suffering with grace upon grace. The grace of God that he pours out to you through the image of God is enough to sustain you. God gives all the grace we need for all the challenges we face. That's what verse 16 is reminding us of.

But I want you to notice one more thing in this text, down in verse 18. At Christmas, the image of God also reveals a glimpse of God. That's why it says there, no one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. Now why is it that no one's ever seen God? Well, the obvious answer is that God is spirit and spirits are invisible. In other

words, we won't see God. But we also learn from the Bible that part of the reason that we don't see God is because of the base separation between us and God because of our sins. We don't see God. But then beyond that, the New Testament goes a step further to tell us that the god of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers because of our sin so that we can't see God. We don't behold him so we don't believe him. But here's what John 1:18 is reminding us of. That Christmas changes everything. No one has ever seen God but now it tells us that the only God, the only one that was by his side, he has made him known. There is a great reversal that takes place. The one who is invisible, the one who is spirit, now takes on flesh and dwells among us so that Colossians 1:15 can tell us Jesus is the image of the invisible God. And the one who was so far from us because of our sin, we are separated from Him as far as the east is from the west. We have now been brought near to him through the blood of Jesus Christ so we can see Him with our own eyes by the power of the Spirit. And it gets even better than that. Because what God does for us in Christ is He takes those blind eyes, that hard heart, that is incapable of even seeing God, and just like Paul on that Damascus road, he drops the scales. He opens our eyes to see Him. Have you beheld the image of God this morning? Have you tasted and seen that God is good?

So one more picture from that devastating storm in Kentucky that I will not soon forget. As I've told you, I've never been to Mayfield, Kentucky but a guy who was going through seminary about the same time as me is right now the pastor at First Baptist Mayfield, right in the heart of downtown. And just like you saw that wreckage from the video, there was major damage done to that congregation. I want you to see this picture on the screen here. You can see the rubble of the church all around it. You see the debris, the levelling that had taken place, the amount of devastation that had occurred. But as you look at that screen, there's probably one thing that stands out to you. What do you see? You see that bus right there in the foreground? Everything around it had been levelled and yet it is still standing. The storm had come and brought destruction and yet it stood firm. And I want you to have this image etched in your brain because, if you'll put it back up there on the screen for a moment, what you might have missed because it's in small letters right at the base of the back of it, is a Bible verse, John 3:16.

[¹⁶For God so loved the world, that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.](#)

What a picture of what God does for us this Christmas. When the storms of life come, when the sin of life tears us down, when the suffering brings great devastation, who can stand in the midst of the storm? Only the one who has that word, not imprinted on the exterior metal of their life, but written on the soft surface of their heart. That's the one who will stand. That's the one who will live. And the reason they will live, the reason we will live, is because we believed in the witness of God and we have beheld the image of God.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we come to you now and ready our hearts to come forward to pray over the cards that we have written out over these last few weeks, Lord, I pray that You would stir us up to be faithful witnesses. To follow the example of John the Baptist and make Your name known, to bring testimony to the light. And Lord, I'm lifting up people in this room, if they have not yet experience the light of the Gospel, Lord, would today be the day of salvation. Would You show

them their need of Jesus? Would You help us to walk faithfully with You this entire Christmas season as we turn our hearts away from what the world around us tells us should capture our focus and instead as we focus our eyes on Jesus alone in whose name we pray. Amen.