

RYDE BAPTIST CHURCH SUNDAY SERVICE

13 December 2020—Advent 3

A Matter of Authority. So when the religious leaders, represented by priests and Levites, come to John asking ‘who are you?’ it is already clearly a very loaded question. John made it clear that he was not the Messiah. Yet there was a tradition that God would send his herald Prophet that went right back to the times of Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-18) and the people had long expected Elijah to return marking the coming of God’s Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6). John is unequivocal in his responses that he is neither the expected Prophet nor the returning Elijah. Their exasperation reveals that although they represent the religious leadership it is John who retains the Divine authority. He then identifies himself as ‘the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord.”’ (Isaiah 40:3)

Identity, Belief and Authority in Christ. There were also Pharisees present, for whom John’s replies were insufficient: ‘you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet’ so why are you out here at Bethany beyond the Jordan baptising as you do? Why? In whose name? Well, John has a name—he knows full well who he is, as the son of Zechariah and Elisabeth. From them he will have learnt of God’s purposes for his life, conceived before he was even conceived. (Luke 1:5-25) His focus on this one task arose from his utter belief in God’s calling, a vocation that would lead to his eventual death at the hands of a cruel power-

crazed human king desperate to hold on to his own limited corrupt authority. John points them, and he helps us, to see ‘the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’ Everything, the whole of Scripture, the Law and the Prophets, all points to God’s Messiah, the Christ. We each have a name and an identity; God calls us by name, he knows us and loves us for who we are. Yet our identity is only finally known and revealed in Christ, as we are baptised not just in water but in the Holy Spirit, into the very life of God himself. We are only completely who we are when we are saturated in Christ, as Christ lives through us. Not I, but Christ in me!

SUGGESTED SONG

See Amid The Winter’s Snow
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xgyfXP96mA>

BLESSING

Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (Psalm 126:4-6)

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and always. Amen.

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Dear Friends,

I’ve been looking through a lot of old family photos recently, trying to find suitable ones to make up another memory book for Dad. I produced one last year, covering the period from his birth up until my brother, sister and I were born, which he really loved. This year’s book covers the family years when we were all still living at home in the big house in Bath. Not surprisingly there were lots of photographs of happy family gatherings around Christmas, and sadly most of the people in them are no longer alive to celebrate with us again, only in our precious memories. I don’t know if it is just a sign that I am getting older, but I am certainly becoming much more nostalgic about such things. For many of us, recognition of our ancestry and the roots from which we have come is an important part of our present lives.

For the people of God, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their ancestors were really important to them too. They did not worship their ancestors, of course, unlike many of the religions and cultures around and about them, but as people of the covenants established through Abraham, Moses, and so on, they sought to honour the One God

who had revealed himself to them throughout the generations. They could trace the path of transmission of the promise of the covenant. They were God’s chosen people and to be a light to the world. It was important to the Prophets to highlight that the expected Messiah would come out of the line of David, a well-established descendency. So when the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke introduce their accounts of the good news they do so in ways that link the birth of Jesus in with an ancestry that goes back right to the beginning.

The Patriarchal ancestors, the Prophets, John the Baptist, the Gospel Writers, all bear witness in their own ways to the One who will come and restore the fortunes of God’s people. The whole of Scripture is saturated with this Messianic hope that transcends time. When we read Psalm 126 we quickly realise that we are witnessing past, present and future, prayerful expectation, all rolled into one. God who caused great joy by releasing the captives from exile comes again bringing hope, peace, joy and love through Jesus Christ to all the world.

We are called to testify concerning this love, so that through him others might come to believe for themselves.

Zoom is the safest way for most people to meet at this time and will continue to be the main way that we will be able to meet for a little while yet. Our Zoom Sunday Service is at 10.30am today; our Zoom Prayer Meeting is at 7.00pm on Monday. The Zoom links will be sent to those who have signed up to receive them. If you'd like us to send you the links, please let us know. If you are reading this sheet on your computer or device you can also click on the readings and songs. There is lots more information on our website which you can find at <https://rydebaptist.xyz>

CALL TO WORSHIP

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy. (Psalm 126:2-3)

BIBLE READINGS

[Psalm 126](#)

[John 1:6-9,19-28](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:12-24](#)

SUGGESTED SONGS

It Came Upon A Midnight Clear
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4tGVUX3YqI>

Silent Night
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pEndgvJe2s>

IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But His mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

FOR REFLECTION AND PRAYER

Each week for our prayers during Advent we are using a verse from Christina Rossetti's well-loved Christmas carol. Just like last week's 'Meekness and Majesty' moment, we have a contrast in the third verse too. We might question the imagery, particularly the soft-soapy sentimentality of the second half, but nevertheless the crowded sky filled with all kinds of angels and heavenly beings is skilfully poised over the simple but equally real adoration of a new young mother towards her baby. We might not sing like an angelic choir, or approach the decibels of the gathered host, yet a simple act of love and devotion, a mother's kiss, drowns out the cacophony of the world. In what simple, private, silent, unnoticed perhaps, yet intimately significant ways can we worship the Beloved Son of God this Christmas time?

SUGGESTED SONG

Angels Rise
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X5V-MKTQLA>

MINI-SERMON OUTLINE

Who are you? What an interesting, important question. And how we choose to answer it makes all the difference in the world. How are we known? Are we known for who we are in our own right? Or are we only known because of somebody else? I know several ministers' spouses who take great exception, quite rightly, to being constantly referred to as the minister's wife (it could also easily be husband) rather than by their own name. Archaic forms of address (e.g. Mr & Mrs John Smith) hardly help. We may be someone's partner, or parent, or child, but we primarily have our own identity. It matters a lot. Every human being deserves to be known respectfully by their own name, just as they are uniquely known by God. When Jesus was referred to as the carpenter's son (Matthew 13:55) it wasn't because he was being shown any honour. Similarly the enquiry by the Jewish leaders into the identity of John the Baptist wasn't because they were showing him any respect. Quite the contrary in fact.

A Matter of Identity. The prologue of John's Gospel makes several broad statements about who John was and who he was not. Firstly, he was sent from God, highlighting his importance not just to the story as being told here but also to God's unfolding plan. Secondly, the purpose of his coming is stated clearly as a witness to testify con-

cerning the light. The light has already been referred to in the prologue as its central figure (another way of referring to the Word of God, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, etc.) and will be returned to later. John's Gospel does not have a traditional birth story for Jesus, so the prologue takes its place. Thirdly, John was not the light. It was vital to clear this up, and also to emphasise that John 'came only as a witness'. John and Jesus were cousins, as we discover in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel, but they were not the same. John's mission was to prepare for the true light that was coming into the world.

A Matter of Belief. As well as 'who' John the Baptist was, it is also important to take notice of 'why' John was sent from God as witness to the light: 'so that through him all might believe.' The stories that we read in the lead up to Christmas and over Christmas itself are all great tales, with which we have become very familiar. We'll be revisiting the Nativity stories from next Sunday. However, in themselves they serve no purpose unless they lead us to consider who they are about, and lead us to believe in him. Likewise our calling and our worship and witness are not an end in themselves. Although it is so important that our discipleship causes us to grow in our relationship with God in Christ, it is not primarily personal therapy but a witness to who God is so that others might come to believe in him too.