

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 15, 2019

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In the news for too many weeks the hot topic has been impeachment. And if you paid any attention you were once again reminded that in any inquiry questions can be crafted not so much in the search for truth but rather to vindicate or exonerate. When I was a boy someone had the great idea of making a television show out of Earl Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason stories. Each week Perry Mason and the prosecutor Hamilton Burger could make a witness credible or look very silly, simply by the questions asked.

John the Baptist was sent from God for testimony. He was a witness. There have always been two parts to the job description of a witness. He is to be an *observer*. And he has to *speak to others about what he has seen*. To be a good witness means to be a keen observer and then be very clear in testimony. A good witness sticks to his guns. If you are not sure what you have seen, or not consistent in testimony, your questioners will pick you apart. Just like on Perry Mason.

John the Baptist was immensely popular. For starters, he was a bug eater and wore animal skins! His headquarters down by the Jordan River was the place to see and be seen. Hollywood would call him "box office" and every television producer would try to get John on his talk show! This popularity only increased when John the Baptist did not ask anything for himself. Had he done so, had he promoted himself, John could have started an ascetic movement on a vast scale and been in competition with the far more profound and far-reaching message of his cousin Who happened to be Our Lord Jesus Christ. In human nature, ambition, and the desire to succeed in building up your own case, is never very far away. Yet for all his burning zeal, John only tried to get his hearers to lead decent lives. And the only indication John the Baptist had any doubts was after Herod had imprisoned him in the fortress of Machaerus.

When John was proclaiming his powerful message, his interrogators tried to make him a leader or powerbroker in his own right. But John said "I am just a voice." His function was as a road-builder. He was to clean things up so the Messiah could operate. John the Baptist insisted he was the Lord's forerunner, not his prototype. A witness is not a doer. He is not the deed. Nor is he the force behind the deed. A witness is the *beholder of the light and the telling of it*. As witness, John the Baptist was the last of the Old Testament prophets and not the first Christian

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evangelist. But he was the first Christian witness. John was the first to point to Jesus and exclaim “*Behold the Lamb of God.*”

You and I are called to be observers and then to give testimony. We do this mainly by the conduct of our lives and only secondly by our words. Like John the Baptist we are called not to bring attention to ourselves but to clear the path for the coming of the Lord. And just like in a court room trial, we must be very clear about this, or our questioners will pick us apart.

Many people use the Advent season for nothing more than a hurried month of holiday preparations. But the Advent message puts an important and very contemporary question. How do we attribute the happenings of events? Do we ascribe them to worldly political powers and forces of nature, or to Almighty God? In the First Century many people in Palestine said the obvious cause of religious and social upheaval was the Roman occupation. But in all of it John the Baptist saw the hand of God. Advent asks what we think about the future. What do we really believe in coming? And what is our expectation? You and I make our witness as we give answer to those questions.