**You are a Witness**

Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist was the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first martyr of the New Testament. ***He is the bridge between the two stages of God’s revelation***.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all introduce John the Baptist with the same quote from **Isaiah 40**. In John 1 the Baptizer himself makes that reference:

So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” John 1:22-23

Whenever all four gospels quote the same verse it’s a signal to us that this is a really important verse. ***What is this voice in the wilderness?*** What does it mean to “prepare the way of the Lord?”

**Isaiah 40 is the turning point** of Isaiah’s long, 66 book prophecy. Arguably the most important prophetic book in the Bible - in both the number of words and the significance of the words. And chapter 40 is the key to the whole book. The first 39 chapters are filled with ***warnings and judgment*** - both directed at Israel and at the other nations. But chapter 40 pivots with these words:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Isaiah 40:1

Two words that change the tone and direction of the whole book: **comfort, comfort**.

Up to that point it was ***“warning, warning.”*** Isaiah, like most of the prophets, was the “er-er-er” alarm buzzer of the OT for chapter after chapter. Warnings are important. If the fire alarm goes off in your office complex or school or apartment building you would be wise to get out. Those loud, blaring noises are there for a reason. When a hurricane is aiming right at us the news keeps hyping it up, warning everyone, especially along the coast. (I know now that’s a bad example because people in Tampa are well trained to ignore those warnings now). So make it a tornado alert on your phone. Maybe you’d take that seriously.

Isaiah is filled with warnings but then in chapter 40 the message shifts to one of comfort and hope.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD double for all her sins.” Isaiah 40:2

Israel has been one of the most ***embattled nations in all of history*** - right up to the present day. It was certainly still very true in the days of Jesus and John the Baptist - albeit in a relative time of peace under Roman occupation.

But here God focuses on the comfort of ***a spiritual truth - that “her iniquity is pardoned.”*** That is the end of the real warfare - the real deep, spiritual conflict - the battle with sin and death and judgment. Did Israel really receive DOUBLE for her sins? Well, Isaiah says it as past tense but the exile was still in the future for the southern kingdom.

The point is that while judgment and consequences are coming for God’s people, there is a light at the end of the tunnel - there is hope that will follow the suffering. ***And that hope centers around FORGIVENESS.*** Where will that forgiveness be found? That’s our key verse - the one quoted in all four gospels.

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Isaiah 40:3

**Here is the hope of Israel and the hope of the world** - the arrival on earth of the LORD - God Himself appearing among men. And someone would be that voice - someone would prepare the way. His name was John.

Luke 1 tells the story of John’s miraculous conception and birth. Cool story - worth reading. The key detail in that story is that ***even when he was in the WOMB*** John reacted when he got near Jesus who was also in the womb. “He leapt” in his mother’s womb. ***John was pointing to Jesus even before he was born!*** He was fulfilling his purpose as a witness before he could form words in his mind or speak.

What we will see today is that God has provided **four lines of witnesses through history** - ***four sources of testimony that Jesus is the Christ***, the King of Israel and the Lord of heaven and earth. That is our creed, our gospel - Jesus Christ is Lord. And it is a well documented, well supported creed. These are rock solid witnesses - and there are four groups representing thousands, millions upon millions of personal witnesses leading right up to you and me who are now entrusted with that calling to be witnesses for Jesus today.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Prophets**

“For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying…’” Matthew 3:3

The first line of witnesses who testify to the Lordship of Jesus are the Old Testament prophets. Moses was the first in that line and Malachi the last published prophet. But John the Baptist was technically the last of the OT prophets. And he simply continued what Moses had started - pointing to the Messiah who had finally arrived.

Up to the point of John’s announcement, ***the prophets were all looking FORWARD through time and through history to the hope***, the promise of a prophet like Moses, a King like David, a priest like Melchizedek. Or, to use the words of Isaiah, the true Servant of the Lord who would suffer and die for the people.

John the Baptist announced those hopes fulfilled in Jesus - ***the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*** That pronouncement in John 1 was the Baptizer’s way of pointing all the way back to the Passover and the sacrifice system - saying here, in Jesus, is the final sacrifice, the ultimate substitute -the One who can fully and eternally make atonement for our sins.

Isaiah not only foretold the coming Servant of the Lord, but gave **a specific sign** so the people of Israel would know that their Messiah had arrived - a voice calling out in the wilderness.

***Why the wilderness?*** Why the desert? What did that place represent for Israel?

It stood for their failure. ***Their punishment.*** Moses led them to the Promised Land. 12 spies were sent to check out the land. Caleb and Joshua wrote the dissenting opinion, representing just two of the twelve - saying, “Let’s go conquer the land - with the Lord helping us we can do it!” But the other 10 overruled the two with faith - and the people as a group went with the recommendation of the majority over against Moses, their God-appointed leader.

***God said, “Go.” The people said, “No.” So God said, “Whoa. 40 year timeout.”*** That entire generation of adults died in the wilderness because of that one group decision. Only two people lived to step into the promised land 40 years later - Caleb and Joshua.

So that’s why the voice had to cry out in the wilderness. I’m sure if John could have chosen a venue for his ministry he would have said, “Hawaii,” or - in his day, “Galilee” (which is actually a lot like Hawaii). But that wasn’t his assignment - it was the barren, dry, crusty, salty wilderness outside of Jerusalem.

Now, don’t miss what the voice actually said there in the wilderness.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Prophets**

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” Matthew 3:3

Whose way was John preparing? **The way of the LORD**. If you turn over to Isaiah 40, you’ll see that LORD there is all capital letters meaning Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. This was the public announcement of the arrival of the King of all Kings, the Creator of the universe. God Himself had come.

Now, ***God had appeared to His people*** on numerous occasions - pillar of fire, pillar of cloud; thunderstorm on Mount Sinai when Moses got the 10 commandments, the glory of the Lord filling the temple and later leaving the temple. But those moments were few and far between and they were large scale, dramatic events. The Bible scholars expected the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 to be a large scale, dramatic event - much like we expect the Return of Christ to be such.

***But the arrival of King Jesus could not have been more subtle!*** True, some shepherds saw a host of angels, but who would believe a group of shepherds? Yes, a few wise men from the east brought gifts - but what do they know?

For 30 years Jesus lived in total obscurity in the backwater town of Nazareth. A nothing place. Hardly on the map. “Can anything good come from Nazareth,” was a thing people said.

But Jesus’ presence on earth became more and more visible - AFTER the announcement of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. This quote of Isaiah 40 verse 3 by John the Baptist, referencesd in all four gospels is designed to get Bible students to open their scrolls to Isaiah 40. So let’s do that. Scroll over to Isaiah 40.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Prophets**

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low… And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed.” Isaiah 40:4-5

“And all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” Here is the decree of the Almighty God - all people everywhere will see the glory of God. The result of this global revelation? Valleys will be lifted up, mountains brought down. In other words - a ***complete reversal of fortunes.***

The poor will be rich in faith. The weak will be strong in God’s power. The small and insignificant will do the impossible - like Mary - an unwed teenager carrying in her womb the Creator of the heavens.

***The proud and mighty will be humbled and brought down.*** The weak and powerless will be exalted. Which side of that equation are we on? Which side of the blessings and woes of Jesus are you on?

***“Woe to you who are rich, fat, happy and cool.”*** That’s the Darin version. “Blessed are you who are poor, hungry sad rejects.” It’s a question of which world you are living for. Are you trying to gain the whole world? Jesus says you will forfeit your soul. Only by losing your life can you find it. Only by taking up your cross and dying to yourself can you follow Jesus and find new life in Him.

The prophets are the first line of witnesses the gospel writers call. Isaiah foremost among them, but not the only one. Over and over in the NT we read, “As it is written.” The basis for our belief - the firm foundation of our faith in Jesus - is the entire Bible. Paul did not invent Christianity. Jesus announced the fulfillment of the Law in Himself - and all of the apostles simply stood up to confirm that Jesus was exactly who He said He was. That’s our second line of witnesses.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Apostles**

“I baptize you with water for repentance… He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Matthew 3:11

***What did FIRE represent to the Jews?*** It was a visible sign of the glorious presence of God. That was how God appeared to the people at night during their wilderness wanderings - a pillar of fire. When the armies of Pharaoh chased them to the edge of the Red Sea, the pillar of fire moved between God’s people and the Egyptians like a burly Big Brother stepping up in front of his little bro and daring the fifth grade bully to take on someone his own size.

***How did Elijah prove the supremacy of Israel’s God over against Baal?*** They did a contest with FIRE - the God who sends the lightning onto the sacrifice, that is the one true God. The prophets of Baal danced around all day and Elijah made fun of them with taunts like, “Where is your god? Is he taking a nap? Maybe he has run off to the bathroom.” That’s in the Hebrew, look it up.

***How did God mark the 12 apostles*** on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out? The sound of a great rushing wind and then tongues of fire dividing and resting on each of them. Not just one person like Moses - 12 - a group now under the One King Jesus.

We don’t get tongues of fire anymore - and I expect we should all be grateful for that fact. ***But we do get the Holy Spirit.*** Jesus still baptizes His followers with the Holy Spirit and with the fire of His personal presence. At the moment that you bow the knee to King Jesus - as soon as you confess Him as your Lord, believing that He died for you - you are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, you are immersed in the new reality of the Godhead who comes to live IN YOU and to be with you forever.

The apostles are all eyewitnesses of the glory of King Jesus as seen throughout his ministry and ultimately in his resurrection. ***This is why we have the gospel of Matthew*** - because Matthew the tax collector kept track of things and put his writings together in this form. The same is true of the gospel of John. Mark was a companion of Paul and then Barnabas. Luke traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys and must have been familiar with the other apostles as well. Here is how Luke describes the apostle’s role in Acts chapter 1.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Apostles**

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us… one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” Acts 1:21-22

They had to replace Judas among the 12 because ***you couldn’t have 11 apostles.*** 12 tribes of Israel and then 11 apostles of Jesus? No - it couldn’t stay with 11. How did they choose the replacement for Judas? He had to have been there the whole time. They couldn’t nominate someone who came in toward the end even if he personally saw Jesus risen from the dead. They needed someone who had been there all the way back when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. There were two men nominated - and one was chosen by lot - the last time in the Bible that leaders rolled dice to make a decision btw.

This was the assignment for the 12 apostles - to serve as eyewitnesses of the Lordship of Jesus - specifically of his resurrection but also of all of his miracles and teachings. All 12 apostles ***maintained their testimonies to the end of their lives*** - and 11 of the 12 were killed for their testimony. Only John died of natural causes and even he died in exile. The others were crucified, beheaded, pierced with spears, stoned, stabbed, burned or clubbed to death.

<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html>

There is no way to PROVE that Jesus rose from the dead. But it is a well documented fact of history that the early Christians and ***the apostles in particular really BELIEVED that Jesus rose from the dead***. They preached this message. They continued to preach it in spite of great persecution. And they kept preaching it even though it cost them their lives. None of the apostles made money or built a big church. All of them suffered and most of them died for their testimony.

Who testifies that Jesus Christ is Lord? The prophets, the apostles, and third: God Himself.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Father**

“And behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” Matthew 3:17

The Holy Spirit came down on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove. We are left to wonder what that moment looked like. Did it look like a literal dove fluttering down and perching on his shoulder? Was it a manifestation of light that took the shape of a dove? All we know is it was “like a dove,” and we have to be content with that description.

The point is that **the baptism of Jesus was a Trinitarian event**. Jesus was obviously there. So was the Holy Spirit. And so was God the Father, speaking to the Son these words of affirmation and affection. Before Jesus did anything publicly he already had the Father’s complete approval. That is so significant for us as children of God.

***You already have God’s complete approval*** - His total acceptance and delight - simply because you are His child. Don’t think for a second that you EARN God’s love with your impressive devotional time or your diligent ministry service or your bold evangelism or your sacrificial giving. You receive God’s acceptance based on your faith in Jesus and Him alone. Nothing to do with you - and praise the Lord for that!

If you belong to Jesus by faith then ***God the Father looks on you exactly as He looks on God the Son***, speaking these words over you, “This is my beloved son… this is my beloved daughter, with him I am well pleased; with her I am well pleased.”

God the Father said these words again on the mountain of transfiguration - with only Peter, James and John present. But at the baptism there would have been a large gathering, since crowds were coming out to hear John and be baptized themselves.

So add to the list of witnesses for the Lordship of Jesus - the very voice of God the Father, along with the OT prophets and the NT apostles. One more set of witnesses:

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Church**

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8

Jesus spoke these words to the 11 apostles - but the responsibility to testify to the resurrection of Jesus ***translated to all believers*** as they spread out and were eventually scattered by persecution. In fact, the documented facts of the book of Acts is that the gospel moved out beyond Israel IN SPITE of the apostles, not really because of them. They stayed in Jerusalem. Yes, they blessed Paul and Barnabas to go off on missionary journeys. But we have to look to church history to learn that the apostles did spread out eventually.

Acts 11:19-20 is a super encouraging passage:

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.” Acts 11:19-20

***Who brought the gospel to Antioch***, the city that would become the base of operation for Paul on his missionary travels?

It wasn’t Peter or John or Matthew or Philip. **It was “some men.”** Mostly the Jewish believers kept their gospel sharing to the Jews. But some bold guys from Cyprus and Cyrene had the audacity to start sharing also with the Greeks. Gentiles. And - here’s the shocker - the gentiles had the audacity to receive their message and commit to Jesus.

This is how the gospel has moved forward ever since - through “some men.” and “Some women.” Who will bring the gospel to your neighbors, your friends, your family members and co-workers? “Some men.” “Some women.” In other words - you will. God has called you to be HIS witness right where you are. He has appointed you and arranged the details of your life for this very purpose. Look just a few chapters later at Acts 17.

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Church**

“From one man he made all the people of the world. Now they live all over the earth. He decided exactly when they should live. And he decided exactly where they should live. God did this so that people would seek him.” Acts 17:26-27, NIRV

This is in the Reader’s version - for kids - but it makes it so clear! ***God has determined exactly WHEN you would live and exactly WHERE.*** He planned out the minutes and days of your life as well as the places you would live, work, study and play. Why did God set up all of these specific details? “So that people would seek him.”

This is so encouraging to me. It means we don’t have to contrive situations. We don’t have to create elaborate strategies to find people. ***We just need to pay attention to what God is doing.*** Get to know the people around you and see which ones God is working on. Who is open to conversation? Who is interested in spiritual things? Who is asking questions about God and church and eternity?

Let’s wrap up today back in Isaiah 43.

“All the nations gather together, and the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to prove them right, and let them hear and say, It is true. ‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.” Isaiah 43:9-10

***God is TAUNTING the nations.*** He is daring them to come up with some witnesses who can testify to the greatness of their gods. Who can stand up to explain the things that have happened? Who can make a prediction about the future, something that has yet to take place?

***God mocks all other false gods*** - calling on them to produce their witnesses. Who is it who can testify to the power and glory and wisdom and foresight of any other god? There is no one who can because all other gods are lifeless, mindless, worthless - there are no other gods. Just statues of wood and stone. Those idols have no witnesses - they have no one to testify for them.

***But God calls His people as His witnesses.*** The Old Testament, as written by the prophets, is His first set of witnesses. The stories in our Bible are not just there to inspire and teach us - they document the long line of witnesses going back to Adam and Eve, to Noah, Abraham and Moses. One after another God lines up the men and women who have testified that HE IS the God who exists - He is the great I am - He is the faithful provider - He is the grace-giver - He is the deliverer from bondage.

About 100 years before the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah God predicted the rise of Babylon and even stated through Jeremiah that His people would be in Babylon as slaves and exiles for exactly 70 years. He commands His prophets to write things like this down as a direct contrast to the brainless gods of other nations who have no way of knowing what is happening today much less what is going to happen in 100 years.

What is it that the Jews were supposed to be witnesses about? “That I am HE. There is no other god.”

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

1. The **Church**

“I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and I am God.” Isaiah 43:11-12

This is our calling, brothers and sisters! Just as God called the nation of Israel to testify to His power and glory, ***so God has called us to testify that JESUS is the only Savior.*** Apart from Him there is no other. God predicted the coming of the Messiah hundreds of years before Jesus came. Over 300 specific prophecies were fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here is our summary:

**Those who Testify that Jesus Christ is Lord:**

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| 1. The **Prophets** 2. The **Apostles** 3. The **Father** 4. The **Church** | “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8 |

Our job is simply to be like John the Baptist and point to Jesus saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” ***We lift our voices alongside the well documented testimony of the OT prophets, the NT apostles*** and countless millions and billions of Christ-followers throughout the ages who have live and died for the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord.

***Even God the Father Himself spoke*** on behalf of the Son, and the Holy Spirit came down in some kind of visible form to provide that final exclamation point.

Now it is up to you and me to finish the work. God has positioned us on purpose, right where we are. But our job is not to STAY - it is to ***“Go and make disciples of all nations.”*** We are called to be His witnesses here in our Jerusalem and beyond that in our Judea and Samaria - but the work does not stop in the Bay area or in the U.S. We must be witnesses for Jesus to the end of the earth. “This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all nations as a testimony to them - and then the end will come.”

This is what King Jesus is waiting for. This is the last page of history - the gospel finally getting to the remaining unreached people groups.

***So first of all, be CONFIDENT!*** What we believe about Jesus the Lord is based on rock solid evidence and reliable testimony.

***And second of all, be BOLD!*** We should never be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The mystery hidden for ages was finally and fully revealed in Jesus. The Jews - even the disciples - struggled to understand how the eternal Son of God could walk on earth as a man. But we know it to be true - and our job is simply and clearly to speak out about what we have seen and heard.

Just as John cried out in the wilderness - ***now we are the voice in this dark and barren wilderness*** saying, “Behold our God! The Lord Himself has come - we have seen His glory, the glory of the One and only, sent from the Father, full of grace and truth.”