Well, as you just heard, John is back, but if last week we met the camel hair wearing, locust-breathed, preacher of “Repentance”, John the Baptizer, this week we do a 180 degree turn and meet a whole different John. The John of the gospel of John is never called the Baptist. Here the emphasis is on John as “witness”. Johannine scholar Gary Char writes, “In this Gospel, John is not introduced by family name or place of origin. He is not principally a baptizer, a prophet, an exhorter, or even a messenger from God. John is a martyría, a witness, sent by God to testify to ‘the Word made flesh,’ ‘the Light’ that no darkness has or ever will extinguish.”

Part of the theological wisdom that John displays in today’s text is his confession of who he is not. In doing so, John stands in a long line of prophets who were reticent to answer God’s call. Amos said, “I am no prophet or a prophet’s son.” Isaiah: “Depart from me for I am a man of unclean lips.” Jeremiah: “I am but a lad.” The limitation that John confesses is the gap between the one to whom he bears witness and himself. “[John] himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

Yet, even as John goes to such lengths to clarify who he is not, who he is and why he is here is defined by and inseparable from the presence of the Word made flesh who has come into the world. John was sent by God to serve as the Voice crying in the wilderness that the salvation of the world is to be found in Jesus. Perhaps in this Advent season, the role of witness that John plays poses a question for us: Can we make similar claims about our purpose? Can we respond to those who ask “who are you” by remembering who we serve and who sent us here?

At last month’s bicentennial convention of our Diocese, Presiding Bishop Curry took delight at the nascent “evangelism” he is seeing among Episcopalians, noting that people who are known for our reluctance to even say the “E” word are now putting bumper stickers on our cars that say: “God loves you, no exceptions” and “Love God, love your neighbor, change the world.”

Acknowledging the difficult times in which we are living, Bishop Curry called on us to “witness a little more”, noting that our world is in desperate need of witnesses to a way of being Christian that looks like Jesus of Nazareth. In contrast to those who claim to be Christian, but whose voices don’t sound like the love of God that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in which he said things like “blessed are the peacemakers” and “those who hunger and
thirst for righteousness” and “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”, we are called to witness to the way of Jesus who welcomed the stranger, broke bread with tax collectors and prostitutes, who healed lepers and outcasts, who died on a cross praying “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” In the words of Bishop Curry, our witness to Christ’s love is needed now more than ever to point out that “the way to make America great is by making America good”, including and serving those who are most vulnerable and without a voice.

As I studied our Gospel lesson I turned to one of my favorite commentators, David Lose. In a commentary on this text written six years ago, Lose spoke of the accepted wisdom that if one wished to be seen as presidential he should portray himself as an “alpha male”. The term “alpha male” originated several decades ago in the research of a Ukrainian zoologist studying the behavior of wolves in the wild. Among the wolf pack there was always one male who dominated the others and therefore had mating-rights to all the females. Listen to what Lose wrote:

“What a curious term...to apply to one seeking to lead the free world. Given all the frenzy surrounding the illicit behavior of so many of our politicians and candidates, you’d think that we wouldn’t celebrate an ethos that places one man above all others and gives him license to have sex with whomever he pleases. Nevertheless, in recent years the term ‘alpha male’ has come to describe our ideal of leaders. For whatever else we want from our leaders, we seem to crave from them strength, direction, assertiveness, and confidence.”

In the face of almost daily revelations of sexual harassment by powerful men in politics, business, entertainment, media, and even the church we need to give thanks for and respond to the brave voices saying “me, too”. We should also rededicate ourselves to teaching our sons and daughters to “uphold the dignity” of all people as we say in our baptismal covenant. In baptism we receive the power to become the children of God. In the process of growing as God’s children, God gives us the power to look at our world and see where it is wrong—deliberately ignorant, cruel, selfish, deceitful, willing to permit evil by being afraid to step up—and God gives us the power to love our world and act to make it better.

The priests and religious leaders came to question John because he was a man who exuded “strength”. But John quickly sets them straight. “I am not the Messiah. I am a follower who points to him who is the light of the world.” John, the Evangelist’s, declaration that there is one sent from God who is the light who shines in the darkness of our world speaks to a fundamental human need for light. Last summer I visited a cave in Ireland where at an opportune time, the tour stopped and the lights that guided our steps were turned off. In the brief moment of experiencing darkness so deep that I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face, I learned that in the absence of light, our eyes can never adjust to the darkness.
Do we think of ourselves as witnesses to the light which shines in the darkness, reminding all who see our witness that the darkest forces in the world are not finally as powerful as they appear? In one week we will again celebrate the joyful news of the Incarnation that the light shines in the darkness of this world. In this time of anticipation, perhaps we might do well to remember that we, like John, have been sent as witnesses to the light. Furthermore, our preparation for the Word made flesh calls us to enter the darkness and point to the light of God’s presence breaking into the shadows of human brokenness: bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and releasing those imprisoned to freedom.

John the Witness reminds us of the importance of letting Christ’s light within us shine so that those around us can have hope even in a world engulfed in darkness. God sent you and me to be witnesses, like John, to grow together and model the “way” Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, showed us: where those in power serve the least among us; those with wealth share generously with those in need; where we pick up one another’s burdens and love sacrificially because, in Christ, God sacrificed all for us.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes: “One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times. The light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these—to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.”

May we embrace this mission, holding fast to God’s Word that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.