

“St. John: Apostle, Evangelist, Friend”

Liturgical Date: Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist (December 27)
Primary Texts: Psalm 11, Revelation 1:1-6, 1 John 1:1-2:2, St. John 21:2-25

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The texts for today’s sermon, the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, are from all the lessons appointed for today. The title of today’s message is “St. John: Apostle, Evangelist, Friend”.

The third day of Christmas my true love sent to me three French hens,” or so the well-known Christmas song suggests. Each of the days of Christmas has something special happening on it—all the way to Epiphany. That is true for us in the Church as well as for the person in the song, who has a house filled with drummers drumming, ladies dancing, and partridges in pear trees. On the calendar of the Church, the days following the celebration of the Lord’s birth are given over to special observances, including the feast day of St. John, which we now observe. And there is much that can be said about John, as he is well loved and honored throughout Christian history, evidenced by the many babies that have been shared the same name.

John worked as a fisherman in the family business. It was a fairly large operation as the Bible tells us that he oversaw servants who worked for them. They must have been successful, as we know from the Bible that the family also had a home in Jerusalem and that John was an acquaintance of the high priest. But he left the family business, forsaking all, to follow Jesus. John was part of the inner circle of the disciples, along with Peter and

John's brother James. Most important, however, is the strong witness of John: the witness to Jesus as the Word made flesh, God with us in person.

John would write 5 books of the New Testament under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: the Gospel that bears his name, three letters of 1, 2, and 3rd John, as well as the book of Revelation. He would be the only one of the 12 Disciples to live to an old age and die of natural causes, living to be around 100 years old. On this third day of Christmas, then, we faithfully observe the Feast of St. John—apostle, evangelist, and friend of Jesus—finding in him an example and an encouragement to each of us.

An apostle is one who is sent out on a mission. A number of times during His years of ministry with the disciples, Jesus sent them out to teach and to heal in His name. By those experiences, Jesus was training them to be not just disciples—people who listen to their teacher and take in His message—but apostles, those who are sent out to proclaim their teacher's message and put it into action.

In the Book of Acts, we have a number of portraits of John as an apostle. In Acts 4, we see him and Peter in Jerusalem before the rulers, elders, and teachers of the law. St. Luke tells us that they both were "*teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*" (Acts 4:2). When forbidden to do this, they responded, "*We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard*" (v. 20). And they kept on speaking and speaking. Later in the Book of Acts we find John and Peter traveling to Samaria to share in the excitement of the Holy Spirit at work there (8:14–25).

Church history finds John as an apostle at a number of places throughout his life. While John was the only Apostle that would not die a martyr's death, he would face persecution. His later years, around AD 95,

place him in exile on Patmos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea where God revealed the words for the Book of Revelation. Finally, he comes to the end of his life in Ephesus, one of the major cities of the ancient world, serving as a faithful Pastor who is said to have preached sitting as his health failed him frequently speaking, “*Little children, love one another.*” Wherever he went, John was an apostle, a faithful witness to and worker for the Lord.

By our Baptism, we, too, are called to be faithful witnesses and workers for our Lord. We know the blessed work to which we are summoned. But so often we find ourselves not living up to our baptismal calling. Either we go off in the wrong direction, or we don’t do anything at all in response to the Lord’s presence in our lives.

John was the same way. Jesus would even call James and John *Boanerges*, that is, “Sons of Thunder” for their strong-often too strong-words in their younger years. At one point (Luke 9:54), we read of his misguided zeal in wanting to call down fire on villages that did not welcome Jesus. He wanted to stop someone for ministering in Jesus’ name because that person was not part of the 12 (Mark 9:38-39). We sense his competitiveness in the group of disciples as his mother asks special honors for him and his brother James (Matthew 20:20–21; cf. Mark 10:35–37). We find ourselves disappointed by his inability to stay awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–45 and parallels).

John is not always a great disciple. Yet in the words of John himself, he is a “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:7). He experiences the forgiveness that can only be found in Jesus. He repents. He changes. And he grows and becomes known for his focus on love. Repentance, change, and growth are part of the life of each Christian as we, by grace, live in the forgiveness of sins that Jesus purchased for us by His suffering, death, and

resurrection. Maybe it's a good idea that St. John's day comes so close to the beginning of the New Year. Perhaps among our resolutions we can desire, by the power of the Spirit, to live more fully as servants of Jesus—and even as evangelists.

That is the second title given to St. John on this day. He is an apostle and an evangelist—one of those four who put the Gospel into writing and extended its reach in that way. The traditional symbol associated with St. John is a bird, but not a French Hen! It is the eagle. Some say this is because his words are so lofty that they soar and bring the reader close to heaven itself. All of the writings associated with St. John have a beauty and divine loftiness to them. John intends that they lift and proclaim the message of Jesus and the life that comes through faith in that message as John gives the purpose of the Gospel according to St. John in 20:31, "*But these things are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, ye might have life through his name.*" Not only did the "little children" (1 John 2:1) who received his first letter find encouragement in his words, but nineteen centuries later so also do we. Encouragement is certainly a theme of the Revelation of St. John. In the opening verses of the book John makes it clear that this is a message delivered by an angel of God that witnesses to Christ who has saved us and who rules as eternal king who will come again in glory on the Last Day. John takes us up for an eagle's eye view of the heavenly city—the New Jerusalem—that is to be our eternal dwelling place. In our hymn of the day "By All Your Saints in Warfare," Horatio Nelson gives thanks for that vision as he writes:

For Your belov'd disciple
Exiled to Patmos' shore
And for his faithful record,
We praise You evermore.

Praise for the mystic vision
 Through him to us revealed;
 May we, in patience waiting,
 With Your elect be sealed. (LSB 517:8)

Through the pages of his Gospel, John the evangelist helps us to see the glory of the Word made flesh. He includes lofty teachings not shared by the other evangelists—teachings that bring to his readers the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ. Teaching us that as Psalm 11:7 said, “*For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.*”

Of course John knows his limitations. In today’s Gospel we hear him close with the words, “*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*” (John 21:25).

The fact that he could not share everything, however, did not keep him from sharing something—something very important. And that is an example for us. Sometimes we think that what we want to say or write about our Lord Jesus is not adequate. So we don’t say or write anything, thus we miss the opportunity to be evangelists in our time. John knew that he was limited. But that did not stop him from sharing his witness through the written word. Year by year, week by week, we are blessed by that shared Word. And year by year, week by week, we have opportunities to be sharers of that Word where we live and work and learn. Today is the day of St. John—but it is also our day to be evangelists and friends of Jesus.

Now that third title, friend, is not officially in the name for this day on the Church Calendar. But it well might be—for in the pages of Scripture we discover in John a true friend of Jesus. Jesus is the friend of sinners. John

knew how much Jesus loved him, and he tried to reflect that love by being a friend.

Very likely John and Jesus were cousins as John's mother Salome is very probably the same Salome who was the sister of Jesus' mother, Mary. So this means that they were about the same age, growing up in the same general area, and it is plausible that John and Jesus were friends from childhood and had shared memories and experiences with each other before Jesus called John to be one of His disciples. What family gatherings those were with cousins Jesus, John, and John the Baptist, as well as Mary, Joseph, Salome, and Zebedee!

John often is there at the special times when not all of the Twelve are involved, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration. John is there to share the big moments, and he is there to do the little tasks. It is John, along with Peter, who is sent to get the donkey for Jesus to ride when He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is John who helps to make the preparations for the Passover meal with Jesus in the Upper Room. John alone among the disciples goes with Jesus into the high priests' courtyard on the night of His arrest and trial. When the other disciples had scattered in fear, it is John who is there at the foot of cross as our Savior suffered, bled, and died for the sins of the world. It is John to whom Jesus gives responsibility for the care of His mother, Mary, in His word from the cross: "Behold, your mother!" As John himself writes, "From that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:27).

John is a friend of Jesus, willing to do his Lord's bidding. John is the kind of friend that stays close to his Master and who finds blessing in loving service to the one who loved him first and most. John's example is one for

us to follow. A title of great honor is to be known as Jesus' friends (John 15:13–15), friends not only of Jesus but also friends for Jesus.

In the very last part of John's Gospel, he tells about some appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. One early morning the disciples are out fishing when someone calls to them from the shore. The first one to recognize Jesus is John. As he tells it, "That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" (John 21:7). He heard the voice he knew, and responded to it. John knew Jesus was his Lord and his friend. In sharing that Lord and friend, John became the person we know and celebrate as apostle and evangelist.

John clearly confessed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (21:7). He proclaims Him as true God and true Man, the Son of God, the Savior of the world who will return on the Last Day to set all things right. Verse 24 says that he bears witness to these things, that the testimony is true. The words are ours as well when we recognize Jesus coming to us in Word and Sacrament. May this third day of Christmas inspire us to follow the example of John—apostle, evangelist, friend—leading us in our own ways to be His workers, sharers of His message, friends of and for Jesus.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.