

John 1:6-8, 19-28
Third Sunday in Advent
December 17, 2023

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, from our Gospel reading, the testimony of John, introduced this way: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light....

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, I mentioned that it is of little use to focus on the relationship between John the forerunner and Jesus the Christ if we did not appreciate the universal Advent proclamation John had for all: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.”

So, we *did* concern ourselves with that universal preaching last week; we *are* in that Advent season of penitential preparation, understanding not only the threat of the wrath to come upon the impenitent when Christ comes again in His glory, but also understanding the grace and comfort that belongs to the penitent – that John’s thunderous call to repentance is not in vain, nor does it leave the sinner without hope. Rather, he calls “Repent” precisely because there *is* hope. (Why repent if there is no hope?) The sinner may hope in the compassion of God because God in history’s time, as first implied in John’s sudden

appearing, manifested His Christ and rolled out and brought to fulfillment His plan of salvation, and Jesus processed to the cross for you and your deliverance.

Since we considered all that last Sunday, it does pave the way for us to now consider the importance of the divine plan's very intimate relationship between John the forerunner and Jesus the Messiah. After all, if John is on the scene, then Christ must be soon coming into history! Our great hope in the intimate bond between forerunner and Messiah in the plan of salvation is two-fold: the prophetic promises being fulfilled **and** the timeline of history coming to life in the messianic plan being unveiled in the arrival of these two – the former pointing to the latter, the lesser gracefully giving way to the greater, the forerunner of God pointing all sinners to the Lamb of God. That's what our text this morning highlights, so let's consider its importance.

Just how important this connection is in God's plan of salvation is highlighted when we consider that many theologians believe that the first chapter of the Gospel account of St John the apostle is a hymn of sorts (the language is certainly dramatically poetic enough to be considered such – "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God")... and, if that hymn of the Word-made-flesh is supposed to carry on throughout the first 14 or 18 verses of the chapter, then verses 6-

8 (found in our text) mean that the hymn of God's Word made flesh intentionally included reference to the forerunner.

Think about how dramatic that verbiage initially is, "In the beginning was the Word" – and then to have it shift our focus (for what may have been, shall we say, verse 2) – "There was a man sent from God whose name was John." Doesn't our own hymnody mimic that layout in at least a few Advent hymns... much like Zechariah's *Benedictus* rings out, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us..." and then it continues by pointing at John, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, and you will go before the Lord to prepare His way."

Yes, from Isaiah's and Malachi's prophecies to Zechariah's *Benedictus* to John's gospel to our Lutheran hymnody, the intimate relationship between the forerunner and the Messiah is unmistakable, as if God knew we slumbering sinners needed that forewarning to arise and awaken from sin's sleep of death, for the dawn of Christ's light was about to shine on us. And, thus, to prepare the way: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John."

Even in the Greek, we get a sense of the very close connection in God's divine plan. The words "from God" – or "παρὰ θεοῦ" – that word *παρὰ* includes the sense of intimate

nearness. John was not just a last-minute afterthought in the plans of salvation! We know that from the miraculous origins of his conception – not that he was “conceived by the Holy Spirit,” as was his distant cousin and Lord... but that the Lord worked miraculously for Zechariah and Elizabeth of barrenness and old age to bear a son, for – as the angel reports to Mary – “Behold, your relative Elizebeth in her old age has also conceived a son... for nothing is impossible with God.” Zechariah did not believe it possible, so the angel struck him with mute-ness until the forerunner was born and Zechariah penned, “His name is John.” Of that, our text reminds us, “There was a man sent from God, *whose name was John.*” Yes, that phrase ought remind us of the events surrounding his conception and birth... that he was an intimate piece in God’s unrolling of the plan of salvation.

In short, John was no self-appointed street-corner preacher. As our text says, “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.”

Now, the question may be, “How does that apply to me?” Some might be tempted to place themselves in John’s shoes and say, “You know, John’s whole life was one of witnessing. I should be like him; *my* whole life should be one of witnessing. Boy, how convicted I am that I do not testify with the zeal and vigor of

John!” (That interpretation actually came up recently in a discussion of this with fellow pastors.)

If you want to flog yourself over not testifying like John, fine. Every last one of us ought repent for not having the zeal of John, or the prophets, or the apostles but instead cowering before men regarding the confession of Christ. But that’s **not** this text. That’s **not** what you are to take from this Advent meditation. The text says plainly: “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light” – why? – not that ‘all might be like him in their confession,’ but “that all might believe through him.”

“That ‘all’ might believe through him? That seems like an exaggeration!” you might say. No exaggeration. John is *the* forerunner, appointed by God and prophesied of 700 years before by Isaiah, again 400 years before by Malachi... so that all of New Testament history might hear the preaching of John, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

God had *you* in mind when He sent John. He sent John to preach to you and call you to repentance and comfort you by pointing you to the Lamb of God, by being the witness that bore witness about the light. And, if God had *you* in mind, then you ought cherish learning of this forerunner and his place in history and his intimate nearness to the coming of the Christ in God’s plan of salvation.

For this reason, the gospel writer John gives great detail about the testimony of John the forerunner: “This is the testimony of John.” That word for testimony is the same Greek word as is used above for the word “witness.” So, three times – “He came as a **witness** to bear **witness**... this is the **witnessing** of John” – three times, the same Greek word rings out – martur – yes, martyr. We associate it with martyrdom, and we could certainly apply that to the one who was beheaded for calling sinners to repentance. But, as the word ‘martyr’ describes ‘giving one’s life up for the confession’, then we also ought understand it to mean ‘one’s whole life is wrapped up in that confession.’ John’s entire purpose was to point to Christ – “I must decrease, He must increase,” John said – because John knew he was not the light, he is not your salvation, he is a sinner who needed to be baptized by Christ just as you did... and yet, this sinner was chosen by God to bear witness to the light for your sake.

Thus, our text highlights his resoluteness when the cynics send priests and Levites to pressure him, “Who are you?” ... and how does the text say it?: “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed.” That seems a bit of an odd sentence, until we realize that the phrase rendered “did not deny” could also be rendered from the Greek, “did not fail to confess.” He confessed, and did not fail to confess, but confessed. There is the resoluteness of the

forerunner, who knew his place and purpose in God's plan of salvation. "I must prepare the way, I must point to the Lamb of God... for the prophets have promised it to God's people!" Yes, *you* had been promised by God through Isaiah and Malachi that the forerunner would testify of the Christ. And so, "he confessed, and did not fail to confess, but confessed."

Yet, it's not wrong to say, "he confessed, and did not deny, but confessed"... for the only other place this word is used in the entirety of the New Testament is the three-fold denial of Peter. What a contrast! In the heat of the moment, Peter denied... did not confess, but denied. But, because nothing can obstruct the Lord's prophesied plans of salvation, the forerunner sent from God confessed, did not deny, but confessed... that you and all sinners may have clear and abundant preparation for the Christ's arrival in history.

To clear of all misconceptions the way of the coming Christ, John the gospel writer records John the forerunner mowing down the false expectations: "Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?" "No, I am not." Why would John respond thus, when even Jesus later testifies that John is a prophet and more than a prophet, he is Elijah who is to come? It's because the proper expectation for 'Elijah to come,' as prophesied by Malachi had been replaced with false expectations of Elijah *returning*. The

belief was that, since Elijah rode off into heaven in the chariot and never died, he would come back again to announce the Lord's Christ. Likewise, 'the Prophet' was a misbelief about Moses perhaps coming again, for Moses had declared, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you." (And, interestingly, where could those looking for Elijah and Moses eventually be pointed, but the Mount of Transfiguration, which Jesus said could be testified to after his resurrection).

But, the false anticipation for Elijah or Moses to return before the Christ came needed to be cut down, so John confessed rightly, "I am not what you are 'false-expecting,' but I am what you should be rightly expecting, as Isaiah prophesied. I am 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord.'""

Yes, if Jesus is the Word, then John is the voice of that Word, that you might receive the good news of the Word in your ears and in your hearts.

Now, there is one more section of John's preparatory confession that ought be considered. They asked him, "If you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, then why are you baptizing?" Consider this for a moment, because it should give special comfort to you regarding your baptism.

Notice, first of all, that the religious leaders already knew what baptism was. The idea of baptism is not made up by the Church of the New Testament. You should never listen to those who say that baptism is a mere churchly custom, a churchly ordinance, by which the church decided, “here is a way we’ve devised to show we follow Jesus.” No, baptism is not a figment of the church’s imagination because even the skeptics already knew of baptismal washing!

But, the second point is even more comforting: even the skeptics knew that baptismal washing had to do with the coming Christ: What did they say to John? – “If you are not the Christ (nor Elijah, nor the Prophet who we believe points to the Christ), why are you baptizing?”

Out of the mouths of even the enemies of God comes the clear confession! Your baptism is a washing that can only be given you with the authority of the coming Christ! Your baptism is part of God’s promised plan of salvation and His people’s deliverance through the coming Christ!

How does John point this out? – “I baptize with water” – in other words, “the authority does not come from me, I simply do what I am told. God tells me to baptize with water for a baptismal life of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and that’s what I do.” ... “I baptize with water, but **among you** stands” – notice that

phrase, “among you”, like Moses’ promise way back in Deuteronomy, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me **from among you.**” – “among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

And, if he is now “among you,” then cynic and hopeful alike must start looking around, awake with eyes open and alert, for the Christ is on the scene – on the scene to “bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn”... in short, to go to the cross and there pour out the fruits of our salvation!

And, if all that is so, as we certainly know in and from history that it is... then ‘the man sent from God’ has done his job. He has prepared the way and awakened us not only with the spine-chilling call to escape the wrath to be revealed when Christ comes a second time in glory, but he has also prepared the way by awakening the whole world to the breathtakingly amazing comfort that the Christ’s first coming in grace was now an incarnate and historic reality... He is **among you**, meaning “on earth, in your midst.”

But, as we said earlier, John knew his preaching was for all people, “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light,

that **all** might believe through him.” And, thus, His “among you” call to attention is still true today. Christ is among you in His preaching and in His sacraments. Christ is among you to call you to repent of your waywardness and be prepared with proper humility to receive His forgiveness, light, and life. Christ is among you today – the light of the world – to forgive, strengthen, prepare you for, and deliver you unto the world to come.

So, thank God for the testimony of John, whose Advent preaching to all – that all might believe through him – prepares you to receive every Divine Service (including this one!) as Christmas, for Christ in the flesh is again today among you.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
December 17, 2023