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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY
Third Sunday in Advent (Series A)
December 11, 2016
Text: Matthew 11:2–15

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

John the Baptist's preaching and baptizing ministry was introduced to us with that provocative phrase, "In those days..." During last week's sermon, I tried to emphasize that those words mean more than just a trip down memory lane; they mean more than "in the past" or "back in the good ol' days." Rather, "In those days" highlight that God's end-time promises were beginning to be fulfilled. In those days, the Lord God of heaven and earth began His greatest and most decisive work of redeeming this broken universe.

It began with John the Baptist preaching repentance from dead works and offering a baptism of repentance for all who turned away from sin, death, and unbelief. John's message was one of no compromise or religious play-acting. To all self-righteous, self-sufficient spiritual and non-spiritual folks alike, John warned that God's axe of judgment was about to fall upon them. It's time to get ready for a greater Coming One whose sandals John wasn't worthy to carry.

This Coming One will baptize all prepared hearts and souls with the Holy Spirit and fire. And when that One arrives, a time of separation would begin. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mt. 3:12). All this – and more! – began "In those days."

But now John is in prison. He ran afoul of Herod Antipas for preaching that Herod's seduction and marriage to his brother's wife was an abomination in God's sight. From desert pulpit to prison goes the mighty John the Baptist. This is not quite the hero conquers all type story we're so used to hearing. We also know what will happen to John (Mt. 14). He will never leave that prison. In the weeks to come, John will be beheaded. He will die a martyr's death.

In the meantime, however, John sends a disciple to ask Jesus a question. "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (vs. 3). Over the centuries (really

millennia), theologians have debated whether or not John was having doubts about Jesus. The simplest reading is that John had a question he wanted Jesus to answer about His, (i.e., Jesus') ministry and that Jesus gives John an answer. What's most important, in my estimation, is how Jesus provides spiritual care to John.

Jesus instructs John's disciples to go back and tell John about the miracles they've seen. Send word to John that "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (vs. 5–6). Jesus is rehearsing for John and his disciples the Messianic promises written in Isaiah 35:5–6, part of today's OT reading. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame are restored to health. All those things were happening "in those days."

In other words, God's end-time work of reversing the devastating effects of man's rebellion against God is well underway in Jesus' ministry. The various physical maladies mentioned in Isaiah and in Matthew are but symptoms of a greater problem: death. Jesus is undoing death's devastation. Isaiah beautifully says, "No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there" (vs. 9). No more killing and maiming. Man is free to live in creation without fear of killing or being killed.

And according to Isaiah's vision, Jesus is doing even more. The Lord restores creation back to its intended harmony and beauty. The hostility of the hot, dry desert becomes an inviting oasis of springs, grass, reeds, and rushes (vs. 6b–7). And creation rejoices in its restoration, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of the Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God" (vs. 1–2). Creation eagerly awaits its final and complete redemption promised in the Messiah.

But then, Jesus issues a caution to John and his disciples. Vs. 6, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (vs. 6). The work of redemption described in Isaiah and seen in Jesus' ministry is following the wisdom and majesty of God the Father almighty. Don't be offended in the person through whom God's end-time work is taking place. Don't be offended by Jesus.

What John didn't live to see was the Lord's final means of fulfilling the Father's saving will of taking away the sins of the world, of removing the appalling presence

of death, or bringing healing to all creation. The Lord's Messiah would go to Calvary and make all things new through His redeeming death and victorious resurrection. Don't be offended in this divine means of salvation. Complete healing, permanent forgiveness, the renewal of all things, the revelation of God's glory, the joy and peace that surpasses understanding are all established in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This is the Jesus born in lowly Bethlehem, who had no home to place His head, who ate and drank with sinners and all the rejects of society, who claims to be God's eternal Son but looks...well, so human. To be sure, Jesus is preaching forgiveness and healing every disease and malady He encounters. He even casts out demons. But where is the separation of the saints from the ungodly? When will the wheat be separated from the chaff?

Does it not strike you as odd that Jesus casts out demons but leaves John in prison? Herod Antipas, that petty Roman politician, was involved in a lecherous, incestuous marriage. Jesus doesn't lay the axe to that evil tree of a man. Herod keeps his political power and wealth. John gets nothing but prison food. Why doesn't Jesus flex a little divine muscle and fix some of these problems?

Maybe we should pause for a few moments and asked ourselves some hard questions. John was in prison because he believed and preached the true word of God. Most of us have not been tested like John was. People might think we're silly for going to church every Sunday. They might even think we're being simpletons for believing that an ancient book is inspired by God and that it gives absolute, reliable wisdom on what should be believed and lived. Christians in this country are starting to face harassment for trying to live out their Christian faith outside the four walls of the church building. But none of us here have been fined or imprisoned for our faith. No tortures; no martyr's death. Not here. But thousand, maybe more, of Christians around the world are facing much more than ridicule and snickering. Are we prepared for a time of greater testing? In this too, we must not be offended by Jesus.

His ways are different than our ways. The Lord Himself suffered for righteousness. He takes all the evil and sorrow of the world into Himself and crucifies it along with His own flesh and blood. Jesus, the God-man, consumes death, swallowing it whole. All of that enfleshed evil is then taken to a borrowed tomb and destroyed. Three days later, He rises again in glorious victory over death and the grave. That is God's answer to the questions of why evil and suffering are allowed to continue. Everything in our lives is used by God to bring about our greater good, our ultimate glorification.

God has done something about the world's mess. Unexpectedly, the world is saved in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The wheat will be separated from chaff; the axe will be laid at the root of the tree. A day of divine judgment will come, but not yet. This is the season of grace. This is the time of repentance, faith, and hope of greater things to come.

One of the marvelous things we learn from today's gospel text is that Jesus get angry with us when we have doubts or when we question God's works and ways. Look at what Jesus says about John the Baptist, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (vs. 11). That man sitting in prison (and we know he will die very soon) is the greatest man ever born!

Then listen to what Jesus says about you and every Christian believer, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (vs. 11). No matter how small a Christian's faith may be, no matter how fierce doubt may rage in their heart and mind, that man, woman, or child of Christian faith is greater than even John the Baptist. Our greatness is not found in ourselves. Perish the thought. It's found in Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

This is the reason for our Christian joy even in the midst of doubts, fears, persecutions, etc. Our God has come. And with a mighty, though unexpected, deliverance He has redeemed us unto Himself. Let everlasting joy be upon your heads and in your hearts. God's greatest work of grace began "in those days." It continues in our day. Christ has come and He will come again to take us unto Himself. Until then, remain true and steadfast in the glory and joy of the Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.