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Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY
Third Sunday in Advent (One-Year Series)
December 17, 2017
Text: Matthew 11:2–11

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

John the Baptist is the greatest man born of woman, declares the Lord Jesus. That's high praise indeed. And what's going on in John's life that precipitates such a declaration? John is in prison. And the sad truth is that he will die in that prison. His crime? Preaching, preaching the truth of God's Word.

From his mother's womb, John was called to be the preacher who would prepare the way of the Lord. He's the voice crying in the wilderness. He's not a charismatic personality drawing men unto himself with promises of prosperity, glory, or adventure. History, ancient and modern, is full of such men. But that's not John. He's a voice calling men, women, and children to repentance and faith in God almighty, maker of heaven and earth. The Messiah is coming soon. It's time to get ready. The means of preparation is hearing the voice!

It seems to me that John had two primary sermons, both led to a baptism of repentance and faith unto the forgiveness of sins. The first sermon was the Messiah would lay the axe to the tree and raise up faithful children to Abraham. The Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the one who would baptize God's people with the Holy Spirit and fire while burning the unbelieving chaff with unquenchable fire; that's the sermon of Matthew 3. The second sermon is found in John 1:29, 36: Behold Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He's the One upon whom the Holy Spirit descends. He alone can take away your sins!

On their surface, those two sermons sound contradictory. Is Jesus a Judge burning away sin and unrepentant sinners in divine judgment? Or is Jesus the One who takes away humanity's sin and bestows the Holy Spirit?

According to today's gospel text, John had heard about the "about the deeds of the Christ" (vs. 2). He sends some of his own disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (vs. 3) Are you the One who takes away sin? Or are you the One who burns unbelieving chaff in unquenchable fire?

One wonders if John the Baptist is beginning to have his doubts about Jesus? Or is he caught in some end-of-life somber evaluation wondering whether or not his ministry of baptism and repentance was a mistake? Or does he know that his time in this world is at an end and so he's sending his disciples to Jesus with the hope they will follow Jesus?

The Bible doesn't give us insight into John's emotional state. But we must remember what Jesus said about John precisely at this point in John's life and ministry, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen to one greater than John the Baptist" (vs. 11). He's no shaking reed shaken by the winds of adversity. Nor is he a soft and prissy man dressed in soft clothing, easily discouraged by the least affliction or the fear of death.

Notice the spiritual care that Jesus provides John and John's disciples. 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). These are the works of the Messiah prophesied by the prophets of old. Jesus points John to God's promise that He will fix what has gone wrong with this world. The ruinous effects of man's rebellion against God are being reversed. Disease, suffering, and even death are no match for Jesus. Take heart and comfort in God's promises fulfilled in the Lord's Messiah.

John the Baptist was the Voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord. His ministry was to bring comfort to God's people by telling them our warfare against God is over. Our iniquities are pardoned with double abundant grace. Now, God's people can live in repentance and faith following by lives filled with good works. That same good news is preached to the preacher. Faith, abundant pardon, hope, good works. Hear our Lord's gospel message well, dear saints of God.

But our Lord issues a caution that we must hear, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (vs. 6). Everything is happening as it should, and it is promised in the Word of God, which stands forever. But don't be offended in Jesus, the fulfillment of God's eternal word and will. What John didn't live to see was how the Lord went about 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 things, the revelation of God's glory, the joy that surpasses understanding are all established in the death and resurrection of the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The temptation to be offended by Jesus remains as much today as it was in John's day. The NT says that Jesus is a stumbling block to the people of the world. His way of salvation is to work through lowly and humble means: a prophet born to old parents, a Messiah born of a Virgin girl in obscurity, preaching that brings comfort to sinners who actually deserve judgment and damnation; in short, a complete reversal of all the values and virtues of this fallen age.

The Lord's way of fulfilling His world is so very offensive according to worldly wisdom. Our Lord's ways are different from the wisdom and power of this world. Instead of a raw exercise of divine power, Jesus takes all the evil and sorrow into Himself and crucifies it along with His own flesh and blood. He consumes death, swallowing it whole. Jesus is the God-man who dies on the cross as the substitute for humanity's sins. All of that enfleshed evil is then taken to a borrowed tomb and destroyed. Death could not hold Him in its clutches. Three days later, He rises again in glorious victory over death and the grave. And it's precisely at this point that Jesus makes His claim to be not only God but your God who has redeemed you with His death and resurrection. Don't be offended at His Messianic plan of salvation.

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 doesn't reject us when we struggle with doubt or ask questions as to what God is doing. Hear your own preaching John. The comfort you brought to many sinners is also yours. Remember our Lord's commendation of 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). He's anything but a failure even though he will soon become a victim of senseless injustice.

But look at 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 the struggles that rage in their heart and mind, that man, woman, or child of Christian faith is greater than even John the Baptist.

We are greater than John because our faith is established on what John preached but didn’t see: God’s Lamb taking away the sins of the world by dying on Good Friday and rising again on Easter morning. All our sins, including our doubts and questions, are washed in the blood of Jesus. Our greatness is found in the greatness of our Savior, Jesus.

This is the reason for our Christian joy. 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. Christ is come!

✠ 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.