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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday in Advent (Series B)

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Text: Isaiah 40:1–11, Mark 1:1–8

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

I sometimes think that critics of Christianity and the Bible fail to recognize that God has a sense of humor, that the maker of heaven and earth also knows how to do things in unexpected, dramatic ways. John the Baptist is one such case in point.

Isaiah the prophet, in the 8th century BC, proclaimed a message of comfort to God's people, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (vs. 1). That comforting promise is to come through a voice, "A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (vs. 3). All sounds good so far until you realize that this prophecy of comfort is fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. According to Mark's gospel, today's gospel reading, John the Baptist is the comforting voice crying out in the desert. He is the one who is to prepare the way of the Lord; who makes a straight highway in the desert so that God's salvation can come rolling in.

The dramatic humor comes in how John is described. Let's skip a few verses for the moment and look at Mark 1:6, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." If you ran across John on a deserted street and you had young children with you, you would probably pick up the pace a bit, hold the children a bit closer to you, and tell them not to stare at that man. Let's face it, John is strange. And he's the one who is to bring comfort to God's people!? A desert dwelling, bug-eating prophet dressed in shaggy camel's hair? He's preparing the way of the Lord? The Lord does things in dramatic ways, to be sure.

He's the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God according to Mark. That strange man is the bearer of good news for all of God's people. His voice is one of comfort. God is coming. Get ready. Things are about to change. And change they do, for the better.

Mark's gospel doesn't give us any details as to who John the Baptist is except that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and that he appeared "baptizing in the

wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (vs. 4). From Mark’s perspective, John’s personal history is unimportant. He’s the promised voice of comfort. Enough said.

Luke’s gospel tells us a bit more. John is a miracle baby, the only son born to the very old Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly relative of the Virgin Mary. Gabriel the angel visited Zechariah and told him that he and Elizabeth, who was always called barren, would have a son and that they are to name him John. This miracle son would be filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother’s womb and he would prepare a people ready to receive the salvation of God.

The voice of that strange man living on wild honey and locusts needs to be heard, even today. For though he looks strange, maybe even frightful, he brings a comforting message to a world shattered by war, violence, and every form of degradation. Through the preaching of repentance and the administration of water baptism, John’s voice proclaims 3 essential messages according to Isaiah. They are: 1) the incessant warfare of God’s people is over, 2) iniquity is pardoned, and 3) God’s people have received double grace for all of their sin (Isaiah 40:2).

This 3-fold message is so important that Isaiah describes the Lord moving heaven and earth so that everyone can hear it. Listen to vs. 4–5, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” From God’s perspective, nothing will prevent the comfort of the Lord from being heard by the entire world.

In this message, the glory of the Lord is revealed. That’s what throws people for a loop. So often people think God’s glory is seen in spectacular signs and wonders, in mystical experiences accompanied by visions of God sitting on His throne in unmitigated glory and splendor. Others would find God’s glory shown in His raw power and awesome sovereignty. But God’s glory on this side of eternity is not revealed in those ways. Instead, it’s found in the preaching of peace, iniquity pardoned, and super-abounding grace and mercy. The glory of the Lord is revealed in John’s preaching of repentance, in John’s water baptism in the rather mundane Jordan River.

Maybe it would be helpful to think about this from a different angle. God’s glory is revealed in people like you who hear John’s 3-fold message: your warfare against

God's rule and reign in your life is over. As you are justified by faith in Jesus, you now stand at peace with God (Rom. 5:1). All your iniquities are pardoned, wiped clean away, never to be remembered again by our heavenly Father. And for every sinful action, thought, or deed, you have received a double portion of grace. Holy Scripture declares that you are living temples of the Holy Spirit and heirs of an eternal inheritance that transcends human imagination in glory, splendor, and beauty.

God's glory is found every time you hear and believe John's 3-fold message of peace, pardon, and double grace. God's glory was revealed when you were baptized in God's Trinitarian name. For that is a baptism of repentance, forgiveness, and new life. God's glory is revealed here, where God's Word is proclaimed.

And yes, Isaiah makes just such a comparison between the glory of God's Word and the fading glory of this world. Listen to Isaiah 40:6–8, "A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

God's Word stands sure and immoveable. That's what compelled people to journey out into the Judean wilderness in John's day: to hear God's Word. So many in our day are saying that the Church cannot depend solely on the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word to draw people into the Church. Other things must be used: programs of various kinds, the latest and greatest marketing strategies, cutting edge technology, constant adaptability to the surrounding culture, and so forth. Remember what people went out to see in John: a desert hermit clothed in camel's hair living on wild honey and locusts. There's nothing particularly appealing in his outward appearance, then or now.

The Word of God he preached made all the difference. In John they heard the truth that this world is fading away, like a wilting spring-time flower in the summer heat. But God is doing something new and marvelous. The Messiah is coming. He will make all things new beginning with our hearts and minds. Did not John proclaim "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (vs. 7–8).

The Voice crying in the desert pointed people to Someone greater. And He is the one who makes all the difference: then and now. The preaching of Jesus, the Virgin-born Son of Mary, drew people to the desert. The preaching of Jesus is what draws people out today.

The ministry of John continues in Christian congregations committed to being a voice of peace, pardon, and grace in a dry world filled with violence, hopelessness, and despair. As strange as it may seem, John the Baptist, with all his oddities and eccentricities, is our example and guide. We are God's Voice proclaiming the enduring Word of God to the world. Someone has come who changes everything. He baptizes us in the Holy Spirit. He gives pardon, peace, and double grace. His name is Jesus. And He's calling all men, women, and children unto Himself. And that's the most dramatic news imaginable!

May the Lord Jesus bless and prosper you in His peace, and pardon, and grace into the glory of His eternal kingdom.

✠ 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.