

## John the Baptizer

Luke 1:5-25

### Trinity Lutheran Church

December 2, 2015 – Advent I



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. It was no coincidence that the lot fell to Zechariah that evening. As the old priest entered the holy place to burn the incense of evening prayer, he chanted: “Let my prayer rise before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” And as the smoke rose like a cloud – its sweet smell filling the air – Zechariah saw something he’d never seen before – an angel standing off to the right of the altar. For years he and his wife, Elizabeth, had prayed to God for the gift of a child, but in all those years of prayer, they’d received nothing but bitter disappointment. Long past their child-bearing years, they’d finally made peace with the Lord’s wisdom – contenting themselves with the knowledge that this was the His “will.”

That was, until that night in the temple when Zechariah heard the angel speaking to him: “Do not be afraid, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.” At long last, here was the much-delayed answer to their fervent prayers – but not just their prayers alone. Here was the answer to the prayers of all who had been praying for the coming of Messiah. For the birth of John was to be the first trumpet call signaling that the kingdom of God was finally now at hand.

When you consider John’s life, his story is rather amazing. He never wrote a book. He wasn’t selected to be an Apostle. He didn’t live long enough to be an eyewitness of our Lord’s Resurrection. He didn’t work any miracles, and he considered himself unworthy to even bend down and loosen the straps of

Christ’s sandals. Yet, for all his humility and meekness, John was a formidable character – and came to be known as uncompromising, unbending, and unyielding when it came to God’s Word. When King Herod married his estranged sister-in-law, it was John who confronted him with his sin. He publicly railed against the false religious leaders of his day, even going so far as to call them a brood of vipers. He Baptized prostitutes, sinners and outcasts and called them to new life as he summoned both the good and bad alike to repentance and faith in the promises of God.

I think it’s safe to say that John both terrified and fascinated the people of his day. To those who were broken down by the Law, he gave the comforting assurance of God’s forgiveness. To those who were secure, and imagined themselves righteous, he pointed them to the unquenchable fire which was to come. John was indeed, an afflicter of the comfortable, and a threat to the “status quo.” If we were to diagnose John today we might conclude he was unbalanced, perhaps even psychopathic – a man trying to compensate for something lacking in his childhood. Yet in John what we find isn’t lunacy, but greatness – greatness defined by the Word, and shaped by the Spirit of God with whom he was filled from the moment of his extraordinary birth.

John had been set apart by God, removed from the world but still in it – a man at odds with his age and its fashions – a man who didn’t blend in, but stuck out. Locusts and wild honey were his food of choice. Camel’s hair and leather were his clothing, and the wilderness was his home. His only joy was in the knowledge that he was a prophet of the

Most High God, a voice calling in the wilderness to prepare His way – a duty he pursued with every fiber of his being. 460 years earlier, Malachi had prophesied, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” John was that promised messenger. He was Elijah for all who have faith’s ears to hear the blessed Gospel News that Jesus is the long-promised, long-awaited-for Messiah.

John’s preaching and Baptism signaled something new. It was a return to the Jordan – a call back to the wilderness – where God was doing a new thing with His Israel in this Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And John was the one who brought this Baptism from God to the people of Israel – an act through which God would make them ready for the coming of His Son. In fact, that was the sole reason for John’s existence – to turn the hearts and minds of the people from sin to righteousness, from death to life, from unbelief to faith, from disobedience to righteousness, and from trusting in their own good works to leaning solely on Christ for life and salvation.

And may I say John’s voice is still thundering out of the wilderness into our ears today – and most especially during this season of Advent? Because the Church is God’s Israel of the End Times, John is here preaching also to us who live in these latter days. “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him,” he says, “Get ready for His coming. Repent and be Baptized. Turn from your sins and live in the freedom of God’s forgiveness. Return to your Baptism and live in it.

Acknowledge your sin and hear anew God’s forgiveness as you bear the fruits of faith in good works.” But in a manner of speaking, the Church isn’t only Israel, but also John the Baptizer. As John prepared the way for the first coming of Christ in humility, the Church of our day is to prepare the way for His Second Coming in glory.

That’s what our work is during these latter days before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. We’re to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ as we give people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins – as we proclaim the tender compassion of our God – as we reflect the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness and death of this world – and as we guide the feet of all in the Way of Him who alone is true, eternal peace. The season of Advent provides us, dear friends, with many, many opportunities to be forerunners and prophets to those around us. Though the world may try ever so hard to squeeze Christ out of Christmas, the Gospel will continue to shine through those who are called by God through Christ to belong to Him. Therefore, as you have opportunity, speak to others about Jesus. Point them to the font and the altar. Invite them to Church to meet Jesus in the Liturgy. Teach them by way of your own preparations for the season what Christmas really means. And in all things rejoice. Give thanks to God for the blessing of greatness in His kingdom freely bestowed through the work and merit of His Son. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.