



St John Lutheran Church

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Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Theme: "The Voice"

A voice of one crying in the wilderness. John the Baptist is a hard character for us to understand. Everything in our culture and the world around us wants to make Christmas cute and cuddly. We want a Christmas that is nice and neat, tied up in a bow. Everything in it's place, and everything must be sweet like syrup. But this John the Baptist character just doesn't fit this model. You don't see many Precious Moments characters of John the Baptist. Camel's hair, eating locusts and honey, and preaching in the wilderness of the kingdom of God. No, John doesn't exactly fit the commercialized conception of the Christmas season. And try as we might to make him into a sweet and comforting lullaby... his message of repentance simply won't go away. His message of the coming Messiah and what He means, will not go away!

And so it was in Jesus' time, as well. The priests and the Levites come out to the wilderness east of the Jordan river to ask him a simple question: "Who are you?" They don't want to know about his teaching.... they don't ask about his message...they don't ask about "this One to come" John was preaching about. They want to know who he is?

John knows what they are asking, and so he confesses, "I am not the Christ." "Are you Elijah?" They asked. "I am not." Are you that prophet? "No." He says. And with each answer, it's almost like John is getting a little terse with them. But they are not going to give up. "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to the ones who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replies, "I am the voice of the one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord!" John is not some great king. He doesn't even call himself a message. He is the voice. John the Baptist, the pinnacle and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, is simply the voice. It's almost like everything in the Old Testament, all of the prophecies and deeds and types are embodied in this one man, John the Baptist. Like a funnel gathers liquid into one stream, so John took everything that had happened to the people of Israel, to that day, and reduced it to one message. "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." "Get ready!" He cried. "The King is coming."

But these priests and Levites, sent by the Pharisees, were not satisfied with that answer. They knew the prophecy from Isaiah, but they weren't satisfied... and so they push him a little farther. "Then why do you baptize if you are not the Christ nor Elijah nor that prophet?"

John then tells them. "I baptize with water, but there stands one in your midst whom you do not know. It is he who coming after me is preferred before me, whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose."

Now there is quite a statement from John. The baptism of John in the Jordan River was a preparation for the coming of Jesus, whose baptism would cleanse from all sin. And this coming one, this Jesus, He was the one.

John says that he was not worthy to unloose his sandals. In Jesus' day, disciples were required to do all sorts of menial tasks for their masters. But this would be the lowest. No master would expect that of his disciples.

But John says this to emphasize how much greater the Christ, the Anointed One, was far greater than He.

This message of John the Baptist speaks volumes to us about our preparation for the coming of Our Lord.

Christ was born some 2000 years ago... so we cannot truly prepare for an event which already happened. So what is this season about? How do we make ready the way of the Lord? Or, for us today, how do we reconcile the preparation for Christmas which we see all around us in the secular world, with the preparation of repentance and faith in the Gospel?

The message of John the Baptist is to make straight the way of our God.

Christian preparation for Christ's birth and return again is very different from the world. For the world, Christmas is about self-congratulations, or about some vague idea of "peace" and "goodwill." Christmas for

many is the thought that for just one day, **everything** can be right in the world... **we** can all get along, and everything will be perfect and normal. **We would like** to believe the story of "**It's a Wonderful Life.**" **We would like** to believe that everyone would come together and life could be grand and perfect even when things don't go as they should.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. **We rejoice with** John the Baptist that Christ has come into the world... **but** we cannot forget that He came for a reason and a purpose. **Christ had to** come into the world because of our sin. **Because of the** miserable mess we have made of our lives, **because** of our self-righteousness, **because** of our pride and arrogance. **That's not what** most people think about on Christmas. **We have lost** the sense of Advent and Christmas being a penitential season...**a season** when we contemplate just why the Messiah had to come and die for us!

Instead of penitence and reflection, we see the true fruit of who we are at Christmas. **We see greed** and self-centeredness. **We see crass** and rank commercialism. **We see people** giving, but most give to make themselves feel good. **Who among us** does not get just a little selfish and greedy when it comes to presents? **Who among us** thinks of the poor and all those who have nothing to eat or clothes to wear, while we congratulate ourselves for putting \$5 in the offering plate? **For many, all** of the family grudges from the past year come right up to the front, **the alcohol** maybe flows more than it should, and before long, tears start to flow. **Yet we work** so hard at putting up the façade or perfection. **It's a Norman** Rockwell Christmas, until you start to dig a little bit below the surface.

This is the message of John the Baptist. **He calls us** to repentance... **He** calls us to be turned away from our sinful pride and selfishness... He calls us to be turned to Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. **The Jews kept** trying to put the focus on John, **but he** just wouldn't let it stay there. **I am not** the Christ. **I am not** Elijah come back from the dead. **I am not** the prophet who is to come. **No, don't look** at me, look at Jesus! **Behold, the Lamb** of God who takes away the sin of the world!

It's hard, isn't it? It's hard to get over yourself. **It's hard to** come to the realization that left to your own devices, you're just not worth a hoot! **That's what sin** does to us!! **But that is** not the end of it, because God says it's not the end of it!. **In Christ Jesus**, you are more precious than anything in the world. **Remember, this for** this is the message of John... **Jesus is** the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. **Now this isn't** stuff that other people do. This isn't simply about the Jeffrey Dahmer's or the Unabomber or such obvious sin. **No, this is** about you. **Or, even better**, this is for you. **Christ Jesus came** into the world to save sinners, **and that means you.**

John said that he wasn't worthy to untie Jesus' shoes, **but** what does Jesus do for you? **He died to** save you. **He washed you** clean and clothes you with the garments of salvation (Is. 61). **He has arrayed** you in a robe of righteousness. **This is not** your doing...**this** is all His work. **He came into** the world to seek and to save the lost... **and** so it is that He is calling you today out of darkness into His marvelous light.

John pointed to the light of Jesus Christ, and so it is that we look, we watch and pray and eagerly await His coming. **For He comes** to you now in His preaching and in His Holy Meal. **He comes to** you with words of comfort. **He comes to** preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and to release prisoners from darkness. **He comes to** comfort you in your heartache and distress. **And we all** have it, admit it or not. **For this world** we live in is harsh and unforgiving. **But God is** loving and merciful.

The ancient church called this Sunday **Gaudete** Sunday, which means Rejoice! **So it is** that we light the pink Advent candle, and we rejoice this day to think of the Messiah who is to come...**and** indeed who comes to us now. **Our Epistle lesson** today (I Thess. 5: 16-24) urges us to be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. **If you see** your life in Jesus Christ, then you have reason to be joyful. **That is how** John the Baptist could rejoice at seeing the Lamb of God, even though He would soon die a martyrs death. **That is how** you may rejoice.... **not** in some sort of sappy "Don't Worry, Be Happy" sort of joy. **For it does** not take long for the Christian to know that there is much sadness and hurt in this world. **But you can** be joyful because you are in Jesus Christ, **and it is in** Him that there lies true joy.

So clear the path! Shake off the garments of filth and shame that is your sin. **Put on the** robe of Christ's righteousness given you at your baptism, and come and join in the feast of all creation! **For here, at** our Lord's

table, you receive true joy which has no end. **For in Jesus** Christ, righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. **Here you, with** John the Baptist, are a witness to the death and life again of Jesus Christ. **For as often** as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show the Lord's death until he comes. **And Lo, He** comes to save you. In the Name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit...Amen.

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