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Trinity Lutheran Church
Decatur, Illinois
2nd Sunday In Advent
December 6th, 2020

“He’s Just A Voice, Crying Out: ‘Prepare The Way Of The Lord!’”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hear the Word of God from Mark 1,

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”

³“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

I must warn you, you’re probably not going to like John the Baptist. Let’s just say He’s not exactly a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. Well, maybe fuzzy, because he hasn’t shaved or had a haircut in years, and he spent his life in the wilderness. Nor is John cuddly. I’m sure you won’t find a Precious Moments figure of John, The Baptist.

John doesn’t fit our image of a successful man. He lived like a recluse in the desert. Camel’s fur and leather are his idea of a fashion statement. John looks more like a homeless person, and probably smells a bit like one too.

And if you're thinking of inviting John over for Christmas dinner, you might want to rethink the menu. Grasshoppers, locusts, and bee nectar are John's idea of a square meal. You wouldn't find John on the Food Channel, but maybe on the old show: FEAR FACTOR. But you might also not want to invite John to your Christmas cocktail party, because John doesn't mix well in polite company. John doesn't mind words. He pointed his bony finger at all the religious types in his day, and called them a bunch of rattlesnakes and slithering serpents. He wasn't even afraid to criticize King Herod for the sin of having sex outside of marriage, which eventually cost John his head on a silver platter. Tell the truth can get you killed. But that didn't stop John. He knew Jesus was ***"The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*** And when you know that, you're not afraid of living or dying because John knew Jesus would even put his head back on him in the resurrection.

But here's the point. You don't need cuddly or fuzzy or cool or fun prophets and pastors. Sinners need Law and Gospel prophets and pastors. And Jesus knows that, which is why He sent John proclaiming, ***"Prepare the Way of the Lord! Make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in. Every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, and the rough ways smooth."***

John the Baptist was God's wrecking ball, bulldozer, and excavator all rolled up into a one man demolition crew, to bring down the old building of sin, and raise up a new creation according to God's blueprint. John was sent to bring low the mountains of pride in our lives, and to fill in the ditches, potholes, and dead ends of sin. John's message wasn't designed to be popular, because sinners don't need a *"tickle me Elmo"*. We need an entire demolition crew to get rid of our sin, and to give us an "Extreme Makeover".

We need John the Baptist, because the situation is urgent. You see the day you die is your personal judgment day, and you and I have no clue as to when that day will be. That's why we urgently need to hear John's message, so that we're always prepared to meet the Lord. And since we don't know when that day will be that the Lord calls us from this life, every day is 'zero hour' because of the immanent arrival of THE ONE who will either come as your Savior or your Judge. That's why John has to get our attention. That's why God's Word is a matter of life or death. So John cries out, ***"Repent! For the Kingdom of God is at hand!"*** And the greek word for *"at hand"* means *"so close as to be able to touch it"*. God's kingdom is so close in Jesus' taking on flesh and blood, and making his appearance on planet earth, as to be able to touch the kingdom. Remember what Jesus said on Easter morning? ***'Touch me and see! A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have!'*** Pg 2

When God brings His kingdom so close to us that He makes a personal appearance in human history, when God brings His kingdom so close that He takes on flesh and bones as a baby: “***And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth,***” when God brings His kingdom so close that you can literally nail God to a cross, so that He bleeds and dies for our forgiveness, in front of countless eyewitnesses to save you, and when God brings His kingdom so close that He rises again and allows numerous eyewitness to see and touch his risen body, and write it all down for you to believe and be saved, you blow that off, and there’s hell to pay!

The kingdom of God is still so close as to be able to touch it. It’s as close as water touching your skin, and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, taking us residence in your heart. The kingdom of God is still as close as the enfleshed Word, Jesus, vibrating your eardrums with the Good News that God isn’t mad at you anymore because of the forgiving blood of His Son, and when the Kingdom of God is so close that you can literally eat the body of Your Savior, and drink His blood for your forgiveness, you blow that off, and there’s hell to pay.

John spoke the unvarnished, raw truth to sinners. “***Repent! Or all hell’s going to break loose.***” The Hebrew Word repent means to “*turn around*”, from all of your unrepentant idolatries that are killing you, to Savior, Who already turned to you and saved you, even before you turned to Him. The greek word for REPENT means “***change your mind***” or “***change your brain***” because to keep on living in the sin, that leads to death and hell, is to live life brainlessly! It’s not exercising a whole lots of sense to keep on doing those things that will kill you eternally, just because they please your nerve endings, while at the same time blowing off the Good News that: “***Today, in the city of David, a Savior, has been born for you! And He is Christ the Lord!***”

And don’t try to weasel out of your sins, by trying to excuse them. If you bring your “*religiosity*” to John, and tell him that God has to let you into heaven because of how religious you are, John will start to snarl, and spit a mouthful of grasshopper legs in your face, and say, “***Nuts to your religiosity! Repent, or you will perish.***”

If you trot out your excuses that you are too busy decking the halls, roasting chestnuts, and sleeping in with visions of sugar plums dancing in your head, that you have no time for that “Jesus stuff”, John will warn you in no uncertain terms, ***“God’s Axe is already at the root of your tree. And whoever does not repent, will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

If you trot out your Lutheran theology, and try to make “Justification by Grace, through faith” the **ONLY** teaching in the Bible, instead of the central teaching, and you say to John, *“I don’t gotta do nothin’ to be saved.”* John will shove his bee-stung, honey crusted, bony finger into your chest cavity, and tell you, ***“That’s true! Salvation is free. Now “bear fruit in keeping with your repentance.”*** In other words, *“Show your love, for the Savior you say you love, by producing the fruits of repentance – a life lived for Jesus – rather than marinating yourself in sin.”*

If you say to John, *“This sermon isn’t exactly the holiday cheer I was hoping for,”* John will tell you, *“Holiday cheer has its’ place. But unless you repent, and learn the true joy of being a wretched sinner, saved by the blood of the lamb, and risen to die no more **ONLY IN JESUS**, all of the holiday cheer in the world is worthless.”*

I warned you. John isn’t warm, fuzzy, and cuddly. John is like an EMT in a triage unit, screaming out orders, trying to save the dying before they’re *“too far gone to be helped”*. He probably even made the little kids cry. But when your personal judgment day can arrive at any moment, maybe today, sweet and sappy messages about gingerbread cookies and figgy pudding won’t save you! Sinners need to hear God’s law that crushes you, nails you and your sins to a cross, and buried you deep in your grave. Only then are you ready for the sweet nougat, 200 proof strength Good News, that Jesus came down from heaven, pushed you aside, and let God nail Him instead of us. It’s only after John has you shaking in your boots for forgiveness and gasping for a way out of your grave, that John now points his bony finger at Jesus and says, ***‘Behold! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world!’*** Now you can breathe again. Here’s your get out of hell free card ***“Repent! And be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.”*** Jesus says in John 5, ***‘Whoever believes in the Son already has eternal life, and will not be condemned. He (or she) has already cross over from death unto life!’*** That’s the only Good News that can truly deliver Merry Christmas to all of us ‘Whos’ down in Who-ville.’ **Page 4**

Now, if you know how to check into your grave dead, and check back out alive, on your own strength, then you don't need John the Baptist or Jesus. But I don't know of anyone, besides Jesus, who knows how to pull that off. That's why all sorts of people flocked to John: adulterers, prostitutes, crooked businessmen, thieves, tax cheats, soldiers, people who flunked Religion 101, beggars with nothing to bring to God but empty hands and empty hearts. They came spiritually naked, hungry, thirsting, and literally dying to live. And John gave them a "*sin-forgiving baptism*". The same Jordan River that split in two so God's OT people could enter the Promised Land; the same Jordan River that cleansed Naaman, the Syrian, of his leprosy, that same water, now combined with the power of God's Word, washed all their guilty stains away. And if God says, "*You're forgiven in the waters of Baptism and risen to die no more; then you're forgiven in the waters of Baptism and risen to die no more.*" Don't argue with God's grace! Take Him up on the deal!

Now don't misunderstand John's call to repentance, as if God's mercy depends on our repenting. It doesn't! Jesus died for all – whether or not they repent. Jesus didn't ask us for permission to let Him die on the cross. He just went ahead and died for every sinner and every sin. The reason that unrepentance damns is because it refuses Jesus' Christmas gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The reason the unrepentant are not saved is because they refuse to be loved and forgiven by Jesus, even though we're already loved and forgiven by Jesus. Sadly, it is to the unrepentant that Jesus – entirely against His will – will one day say, "***Depart from Me, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.***" And the unrepentant will go to a hell that is totally unnecessary because they loved their sin more than Jesus!

But to the repentant, John cries out, "***The kingdom of God is at hand!***" It's so close in Jesus' birth, you can literally touch your salvation and God's kingdom in the flesh and bones of Jesus. The kingdom of God is so close to us in the Word, the washing, and the supper, as to be able to touch it. "***Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven!***" "***Baptism now saves you!***" "***Take and eat my body, given for you! Take and drink my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins.***" And when the Savior, and the kingdom of God comes this close to you, don't refuse your being loved and forgiven by Jesus! You are loved and forgiven by Jesus.

So don't downplay your sins! If you make the bad news less bad, you actually make the Good News of Jesus less sweet. John says, "***Repent of your sins – in all of their badness,***" and then enjoy the Good News in all of its' sweetness, that God still loves you, and to prove that He does, John is given the privilege of announcing "***Behold! The Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!***" Admit your sins in all of their ugliness to a Father Who never stopped loving you, and then... hear, see, taste, touch, and inwardly digest the Good News that: "***Today! In the City of David, a Savior has been born for you! And He is Christ the Lord!***" And then laugh all the home to heaven, and spend yourself in sweet service to a Savior, Who has been this good to you!

Both at Jesus' first coming, and when He comes again, Isaiah promises that "***And all flesh will see the salvation of our God.***" On the last day, all the world will see that Jesus is the Savior, but they won't all have salvation, because many don't know that they're already included in the death and resurrection of Jesus, while others know it, but they're blowing it off. And so our sweet Savior, now sends us out into the world to be John the Baptists to this generation. We may look as out of place in this world, as John the Baptist did in His day. But we're willing to be booed for Christ if that's what it takes to point others back to the cross, where, "***all flesh already saw the salvation of our God, hanging like a Christmas ornament, on the Christmas tree of the cross,***" so that underneath that tree we receive the greatest Christmas gifts ever: the forgiveness of every sin we ever did wrong, a clean conscience, access to God's family, life that never ends, and a home in the paradise of God. And that Good News is just too good, to keep to ourselves. AMEN.