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Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A ‘Living’ John the Baptist?”

Text: Mark 1:1-8 (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the days leading up to Christmas, it is popular for some churches to have what are called “living nativity scenes.” Members of the church dress up as the characters in the Christmas Story and people come by to see, perhaps, a little of what that first Christmas might have looked like. And so they will see a baby, and His parents Mary and Joseph, probably looking adoringly at Him. There will probably be shepherds with their sheep, and other animals in a peaceful and quiet stable. And the people who come to see the scene will probably remark how nice and realistic it is, and go home. And then after Christmas the memory fades until the spectacle is staged again next year. . . . But to my knowledge that’s as far as it goes. I don’t think anyone has ever been converted to believe in Jesus as their Saviour simply by witnessing a “living nativity.”

And so perhaps what would be better to help people understand the true meaning of Christmas would be something else, something a bit different, something suggested by the Gospel writer Mark. For when he began to write his Gospel, he begins by saying ***“The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”*** – but then instead of telling us about the nativity, he tells us of *John the Baptist!* And so perhaps, instead of a “living nativity,” we should have a “living John the Baptist,” for according to Mark, he is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord. . . . And it would be quite a spectacle, wouldn’t it? A man dressed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, eating grasshoppers and wild honey. We could even offer these treats to those who came to see him instead of candy canes!

But there would be another difference too. Our “living John the Baptist” would not only dress and act like John, he would preach! He would proclaim the message that John the Baptist came to proclaim: *“Make straight the way of the Lord.”* Make straight because something is not straight, not right, but twisted and confused. And what is not right is our lives – you and I, those we work and live with, those who seem to have it all together, those we will shop with shoulder-to-shoulder in the mall – all of us, we are not straight. We are crooked, twisted, and confused. Our sin creates a barrier in our hearts that does

not want the Lord in! And so we have taken the straight and clear way of the Lord and twisted and contorted it into . . . well, into a maze! – a maze of sensible-sounding explanations for sin, excuses, and extenuating circumstances. Of the “I had no choices,” the “but everyone is doing its,” and the “but I’m not hurting anyones” . . . and round and round we go. And we’ve created such a maze in our hearts that we even have trouble finding our way through, and recognizing the sin in our own lives. . . . But to this it is John the Baptist who says “enough!” The Lord is coming. Make straight the way of the Lord! Or according to Isaiah, ***“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 so the sin we try to hide in the valleys, or put high up and out of sight, or the rough terrain barriers we try to set up to give ourselves time to escape – John has come to do away with all of it; to level all of our excuses and explanations. To be a kind of “human bulldozer” in our lives, and *“make straight the way of the Lord.”*

So how do you think the people of Fairfax County, or Vienna, would like our “living John the Baptist?”

They wouldn’t! And neither do we. The bulldozer of the Law in our hearts hurts. Seeing the ugliness of our sin is not pleasant. John’s message is very different than the voices in our world today, which tell us that deep down we’re okay, and to accept who you are. John comes along with his bulldozer and says, *“You’re not okay! You’re a mess! Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”* Repent, because you put yourself before God; because you put yourself before others; because your thoughts, words, deeds, and desires are all tainted by sin. You’re not as nice and clean and respectable as you want others to think you are; or as you think you are. . . . And John makes no apologies. He doesn’t say, “Oh, sorry to burst your bubble!” No, he says *“Thus saith the Lord!”*

So how do you think the people of Fairfax County, or Vienna, would like our “living John the Baptist?”

But our John would also do one more thing. He wouldn’t only dress and eat authentically. He wouldn’t only preach his message of repentance to *“make straight the way of the Lord.”* He would also be pointing. Pointing to that “living nativity” down the street. Because that’s where he wants to lead our humble and repentant hearts. To baptism into the life of the Son of God, the Lamb of God, lying in humility as a baby in a manger. If we bypass John and go right to the “living nativity” we won’t get it. We won’t understand. We won’t know who this child is. But when John takes us by the hand – or really by the ear – and leads us to the child, we see something completely different. It is no longer just a quiet and peaceful scene, it is the birth of the One born to be the offering for our sins. For all those sins that the bulldozer of John the Baptist just laid

bare. All of those filthy, ugly, shameful sins, this child has come to take from us and put on His tender, innocent body. And for that, for our benefit, this Son would receive His Father's wrath, the wood of the manger would be replaced by the wood of the cross, the peaceful stable would be replaced by the angry cries of "Crucify Him!," His mother's milk replaced with vinegar, His swaddling clothes stripped away that He hang naked in shame, and His life offered on the altar of the cross as His blood pours into the ground.

But as John points us to all of that, He is at the same time preaching to us again! And telling us what it all means. ***"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."*** You see, as hard as John the Baptist's message is, it is for our comfort. For as John's bulldozer of the Law humbles us and drive us to confession, as we are baptized with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, we receive blessing and forgiveness, double for all our sin. We hear the voice of our Lord from the cross, the voice of the Pastor in the Absolution, *"I forgive you all your sin."* . . . And the peace of the nativity is given to us. For we are the newborn, born again, children of God, with God our Father and our Mother the Church looking over us. We are wrapped in the swaddling clothes of Word of God, and fed by our Lord's true body and blood. We have the angels of God watching over and protecting us, and rejoicing over one sinner who repents. . . . Only this is no play, no temporary nativity which is here for a season and then gone until next year! No, this is the reality for us every Sunday, every day of the year, as our once crucified but risen Lord and Saviour blesses us, forgives us, feeds us, strengthens us, and sustains us, as we receive from His hand ***"double for all our sins."***

Doesn't seem very fair, that exchange! Him taking all of our sin and giving us His blessing. And ***"double for all our sin!"*** But that's exactly the point – it isn't fair, and it doesn't make sense, and you can't figure that out by looking at a "living nativity." That's why we need John the Baptist. To make straight the path, to point the way, to take us by the ear that we hear the Word of the Lord. . . . Would the people of Fairfax County, or Vienna, like having a "living John the Baptist" like this around? Probably not. But they need him. We need him. And that's why we're here, why God has given us a place here in Vienna. To be His voice. To point to Him. To bulldoze with the Law, but also to preach the comfort of the Lord, His forgiveness and His blessing. And while that may not be what we want, it is exactly what we need.

But isn't it interesting, what we heard of the response to John in the Gospel! ***"And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."*** Was that success due to John's charisma? No, he looked like a freak! Was it due to the popularity and ease of his

message? No, his message was hard and cuts in our hearts. It was the work of the Lord through His Word, for the Word of the Lord is powerful. John simply preached what he had been given to preach. . . . And so we, as we now go out into Vienna and all the area of Fairfax County. What will be the result? I do not know. But this I do know, as Isaiah has also told us: ***“He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”***

So – any volunteers to be our “living John the Baptist?”

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 steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.