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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Voice”

Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

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

“And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ . . . He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness . . .’”

In the wilderness. In the desert. In the nothing. The desert is perhaps one of the harshest places to be. In the daytime the heat can be unbearable, and then at night the temperature drops and chills you to the bone. There is very little water, very little food, very little shade, very little . . . anything. It is easy to get lost in the desert, with no landmarks to guide your way. Sandstorms can bury you alive. . . . And the desert doesn't care who you are – what color your skin is, whether you're rich or poor, famous or unknown, popular or shunned, powerful or weak, man or woman, young or old – it seeks to devour all who trespass its boundaries. . . . In the desert what you have does you no good. Your possessions cannot help you – in fact, they hinder you and make your going even more difficult. . . . The wilderness, the desert, is the great equalizer. You may be something going in, but the desert quickly lays you low. The things that mean so much to us, mean very little in the wilderness, in the desert. With all that you are, all that you have, all that you bring with you, the desert is unimpressed. Its barrenness only stares back at you blankly . . . and then it hits you – you're looking at death.

So why did John the Baptist come in the barren wilderness? In the desert? Why didn't he make it easier for people to hear his message? Going instead to Jerusalem, to streets crowded with people? Why not just write an article in the Jerusalem Gazette, or buy some time on the Jerusalem Christian Broadcasting channel?

No, John says, ***“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness”*** . . . crying out from the place of death. For death is where we all must go. And death doesn't care who you are – it is the great equalizer. We are all equally tall when lying in a box. There we can all boast the same, we all have the same abilities. You may be something going in . . . you may have a lot of things that mean a lot to you . . . but death is unimpressed. It seeks only to devour. . . . And so to impress upon you this fact, John the Baptist knows that

sitting at home drinking a cup of coffee while reading the religion section of the Jerusalem Gazette, or sitting on your comfy couch watching Christianity on TV doesn't cut it. But staring into the jaws of death does.

“Who are you, John? . . . I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” For you see, that's the other thing about the wilderness, the desert – the silence is deafening. There's no TV or radio on in the background; no children playing outside; no noise from cars or trucks or trains or planes; no soothing sound of the breathing or heartbeat of your loved one next to you. There is . . . just . . . silence. A silence so deep it closes in on you . . . until you do hear something . . . it is the voice of your conscience, now speaking to you, testifying against you. For all alone you are vulnerable and defenseless against it. And it is reminding you of those things in your past which you have tried so hard to hide and you thought were gone! Reminding you of what you have failed to do. Reminding you of your shortcomings and failures, missed opportunities, regrets, foolish escapades. The “would've, should've, and could've!” And you wish you could shut it off, but your accuser, the devil, will not let you. . . . And you wish you could hear something else, *anything* else, to still the voice of your accuser.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”

And so John comes to you. The voice. The voice in the midst of the wilderness of sin, death, and the devil. The voice which breaks the silence. The voice which leads you into the water, the water of life, the water of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. For in the wilderness, in the desert, the only life is where there is water. And so John calls you to the water of life. . . . In our dens and living rooms, offices and stores, stadiums and playgrounds, we think we have life. My job is my life. My family is my life. My things are my life. I would just die without . . . without what? But once you get out into the wilderness, you realize: no, you're not going to die without something – you're just gonna die! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. And that sand running through your fingers? It is your time running out.

But into this desert of death that we call our life, God has sent His man, His messenger, John the Baptist. And John calls you to the water of life, so that you will live and not die. The water of life where our Saviour is, for Jesus too stood in the water, with us, and was baptized by John – not for Himself, but for you.

“Who are you, John? . . . Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet? . . . No, no, no.” He is simply the Voice who leads us to the Word, the Word made flesh, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Voice who calls us away from the trappings of our

civilized sins, into the desert of repentance, and to the water of forgiveness and life. The Voice who came to bear witness, to testify. . . . And once Christ speaks, John's voice goes away. His job is done. And he quickly disappears. For the One who comes after him, who speaks after him, is greater than he. ***"The strap of whose sandals [he is] not worthy to untie."*** . . . ***"He must increase, and [John] must decrease."***

And so what does Christ then say? What has John led us to, to listen to, to hear, to give us life? Luke tells us. It is the words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard this evening. In the first recorded sermon of Jesus, Jesus tells us that these words are about Himself.

***"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion –
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord,
that he may be glorified."***

And to us, dying in the wilderness of sin, poor and broken, faint and suffering, hungry and thirsty for things that last, looking for meaning and life, could there be any better news than this? Our Saviour comes with His Spirit – His Spirit which He gives to us – to heal us, raise us, and bind our wounds. To comfort us, cover us, and give us life. To forgive our sins, clear our conscience, and plant us in His well-tended garden. To stop our bleeding with His bleeding, to deliver us from death with His death, to feed our hungry souls with His very own body and blood. . . . And we who in this wilderness have nothing, are given everything.

And in this Advent season John and his Voice lead us to this Saviour, God come to be with us in this wilderness of sin. God with us as a baby in a manger. God with us . . . well, as John says, with shoes on! For when John said, ***"He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie,"*** that was not just a figure of speech! That is *incarnational* language. For God is not with us in the way He was in speaking to Adam and Eve after they sinned. And God is not with us in the same cloud and fire that He was on Mt. Sinai. No, John leads us to our God who is now with us with human flesh

on, with shoes on. And walking in our skin, in our shoes, Jesus knows what life is like in this wilderness. He was there. Facing what we have to face, and even more. He experienced temptation. He felt rejection, and the sting and pain of death, losing someone very close to you. He knew prejudice, and faced hard days, and opposition, and nights without sleep. He knew hunger and thirst, and He knew the cross. . . . But as He hung there on the cross, with His lips parched and dry, with the fire and heat of God's wrath beating hot upon Him, utterly alone and forsaken, with the accusing voices mocking and taunting Him . . . look! For there is your **oasis** in the wilderness. There is your life. And the blood and water that flowed from His side fill chalice and font, rescuing us from the wilderness, from our sin, from death and the devil, and giving us life. Both life now, and life eternal. . . . And we who in this wilderness have nothing, are given everything.

Now some – perhaps even some of you – might be thinking, “*Criminy, Pastor, that’s not a very Christmassy message!*” But that’s only because there’s something else in the wilderness that I haven’t mentioned yet – and that is *mirages*. And we’ve been looking at the mirages of Christmas too long. The mirages of Christmas cheer, worldly peace; a holiday at the end of the year to escape, for a while, reality, and our problems, and our failures. But the problem with a mirage is that once you get to it, it disappears. And so to this kind of Christmas. It quickly goes away, and the reality is still there. . . . And so John is the Voice that makes the mirage go away. To point us and lead us to the Christmas which never goes away. Not of escape, but of rescue from the wilderness. Not of worldly peace, but the peace of God. Not of shallow cheer, but deepest joy. . . . And so John speaks, that we might understand. “***For unto you is born this day in the city of David***” – in the wilderness! – “***a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.***”

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