

7 December 2003
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“He’s Back!”

Text: Luke 3:1-6

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

There are some people in this world that you simply cannot ignore. Try as you might, they just keep coming back, they keep confronting you, they keep putting themselves in your mind. For example, in the comics, that person for George Wilson is Dennis the Menace. On TV, it would be car commercials. And in the Church, that person is John the Baptist.

For John the Baptist comes back to us every year during Advent. Every year, we hear His message of repentance, and He will not be ignored. . . . That’s how it was when he first arrived on the scene too. We heard in the Holy Gospel this evening that after *“the Word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness,”* he then *“went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* He went into all the region – he didn’t want to miss any parts. He went around the whole region, and, I imagine, he showed up in many places more than once. For he was the messenger of the Lord come to prepare the way for the Lord, as we heard from the prophet Malachi . . . and he took his job seriously. This was what he was born for. This is the Word he had been waiting to proclaim ever since leaping for joy in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. And he would not be denied, or ignored.

And, in fact, so persistent was John in his proclamation that King Herod arrested him and threw him in prison to try to shut him up! But even there John continued to preach his message of repentance, only finally being silenced when he was beheaded. . . . You may not like him, but you have to deal with him. He will not be ignored.

And now he’s back for you.

And if he were here today, John would be the one knocking on your door as you’re putting up your Christmas tree. He’d be the one following you around the mall as you’re buying your gifts. His would be the card you receive that said not *“Peace on Earth,”* but *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”* And he would not stop until you dealt

with him. You may not like him, but he will not let you ignore him. . . . And his message to you would simply be this: Repent. Because if you do not want to repent, then you do not really want to celebrate Christmas.

Now, that sounds like a pretty strong statement to make, but nevertheless, its true. For if we do not want to repent, there is no reason to celebrate Christmas. Rudolph, Frosty, the Grinch, Scrooge, George Bailey, and one horse open sleighs, can only take you so far. The hymns and songs and carols we like so much begin to grow tiresome even before Christmas. And for others, “the most wonderful time of the year” can be the loneliest time of the year, or the costliest time of the year, which it takes the rest of the year to pay for.

And so it is into this wilderness – our wilderness – that John the Baptist again comes. And he comes not as the anti-Christmas, but to help us celebrate Christmas. And if you want to celebrate Christmas, he says, repent. No glitzy holiday special. No American Idols and big production numbers. Just real life. Because Christmas is about real life. About your real life, and about the real life that lay in the manger.

And so John the Baptist is back (as we heard) to ***“Prepare the way of the Lord, mak[ing] his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways.”*** . . . Think about those things for a moment. What is being said there. It is not geography that is being talked about there, but the reality of our sin. Our sin which keeps digging us in deeper. Our sin which makes mountains out of molehills. Our sin which twists and perverts the words and motives and acts of others, and assumes the worst. Our sin which seeks to serve self while making the ways of others rough and difficult. This is the geography of our sin. This is our doing.

But our Lord has come to fill those valleys of sin that we dig – to fill them with His own flesh and blood. He has come to level those mountains of sin that we erect – to smash them with His Law. He has come to straighten all that we pervert and twist with the truth of His Word. He has come to smooth what we have made rough, through His love and forgiveness.

And so repent, John says. Repent and turn to the One who does such wondrous things. Do not fool yourself and perform revisionist history on your past and think that you really weren’t all so bad. Do not fool yourself and assign higher motives to yourself than you really had. Do not fool yourself into thinking that you have already repented, or do not need to repent again. In fact, do not focus on what you have done at all! Instead, focus on yourself. For your deeds are only the fruits of the tree. No, do not repent of this or

that. Do not try to debate or justify what is sin and what is not. Do not spend your time weighing, distinguishing, or differentiating. No, repent, John says, that you are wholly and altogether sinful.

And so we did. **“O almighty God, merciful Father, I [am] a poor, miserable sinner.”**

But even though we speak that confession, or one like it, every week, it is John the Baptist that points us to whom we speak that confession. Because we do not confess to some non-descript, generic God that everyone believes in, as so many would have us believe these days. No, we are confessing and repenting to the One for whom John is preparing and pointing. The God, the only God, who became flesh for us. The God wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. The God who grew up in the household of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. The God who stood side-by-side with us sinners and was baptized for us as one of us. The God who lived in the wilderness for a while. The God who was tempted in every way like us, and so knows the temptations that we face. The God who was ridiculed and made fun of, and called demon-possessed. The God who went to the cross for us. Who was whipped for us. Who suffered and died for us, and then rose from the dead for us. This is the One, John says. This One, and no other.

For this child in the manger shows that God is truly serious in keeping His promises and dealing with our sin.

And so again today, John the Baptist is knocking on your head and your heart, and he will not be ignored. It's his job. For he wants you to celebrate Christmas. He doesn't want you to *remember* Christmas and *celebrate* yourself! He wants you to celebrate Christmas. And so he points us to the Christ. And we celebrate the Christ not by trying to hold the baby in the manger in our arms and “have Him in *our* hearts,” but by being held by Him in His heart and His nailed pierced hands. We celebrate not by trying to wash and feed Him (as if we could!), but by being washed by Him at His font and fed by Him at His altar. We celebrate not by trying to speak to Him, but by hearing Him speak to us in His Word. And when that happens, it's Christmas – not one day, but every day. For thus confessing and repenting and turning to Him, we receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

And that we might receive that gift, that is why John the Baptist came. Yes, his message was pretty harsh and strong. Yes, he himself was a bit of an eccentric. And yes, none of us likes to be told we're sinners and need to repent, and we'd like to ignore him. But he will not be ignored. No, his voice will continue to be **“the voice crying in the wilderness”** until his voice is no longer needed, when the God who came first as a child

in flesh and blood will return in the same flesh and blood at the end of time. And then what the prophet Isaiah spoke will come true: ***“all flesh will see the salvation of God.”*** All flesh. Both those who believed and those who did not. Those who repented and those who did not. But there will be no ignoring! Only the joy of salvation, or the tears of condemnation.

And so John's back. Do not ignore his call. Repent, and receive the gift of forgiveness that Christ has come to give to you.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.