

4 December 2005
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Stirring the Pot”

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.

Don't stir the pot! Live and let live. You go your way, and I'll go mine. You've heard those things. Maybe even said them a time or two. We want to be left alone. Don't bother me, I'm fine! And especially when it comes to religion . . . people even get a bit more stern: don't impose your religion on me! Which for many these days means: don't even bring it up for discussion; don't say something is wrong; don't talk about sin; don't do anything that might get people upset. Don't go there. Stay superficial, so we can all just feel good about ourselves.

Well today, as he does every Second Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist comes on the scene, and to all that says: *Phooey!* John is the divinely appointed “pot stirrer!” He will not leave you alone. He will not let you go your own way, and remain in your sins. And he's going to impose his religion on you, whether you like it or not! He's going to be that voice in the wilderness – that voice that you try to ignore, but can't. That voice that keeps speaking, keeps proclaiming, keeps calling you to repentance. He doesn't have time to worry about his wardrobe (clothed with camel's hair and a crude leather belt); or what he eats (locusts and wild honey), to make himself look respectable and attractive to you. There are more important things at hand.

And so John is here again today in answer to our prayer. What prayer? The one we prayed together earlier: *“Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of your only-begotten Son that at His second coming we may worship Him in purity.”* And so John has come to stir up your hearts. He won't leave you alone, because salvation is at stake. Your salvation.

Now, perhaps you didn't know what you were praying when we prayed that prayer together. Maybe you weren't paying too much attention. No matter. John's here anyway, and so we have to deal with him. And John's good at what he does – stirring up hearts and preaching repentance. Very good. Because he doesn't stop at the easy sins, the obvious sins, the sins that everybody knows are sins, because that's not stirring the pot; that's not stirring up your heart. That kind of preaching only makes comfortable, confident sinners . . . and Pharisees.

No, John is here to get to the heart of the matter, and to the bottom of *your* heart. To stir up all those sins that have settled into your heart; that can't be seen; that maybe have been there, in your heart, so long that you don't even realize they're there anymore. The sins you like and don't want stirred up. The lack of love, the anger, the resentment that we love to hang onto. The false belief, the wrong belief, the boredom with God's Word and truth. The unwillingness to forgive, the pride, the thinking that how we live doesn't matter. The easy silence that comes from our lips in our lack of prayer and our failure to tell others of our Saviour. The evil desires, and the sins that we commit by lazily doing nothing. And what else is down there, in the deep recesses, the "nooks and crannies" of your heart, that needs stirring up? That we're comfortable with? That we try *oh so hard* to hide? That would embarrass you if anybody else knew they were there? John wants to stir it all up today. That you'll see that your heart is not so clean, but in fact, quite the opposite.

And there's only one reason why John does that; the reason we heard from the prophet Isaiah: **to comfort us**. Now that *sounds* funny, because what John comes to do is make us uncomfortable! Stirring the pot, *not* leaving us alone, and imposing his religion on us! And as you know, if you've ever tried to speak to someone about sin and about God and about Church, what happens is the very opposite of comfort! People lash out and rebel and *act all stirred up!* . . . *But is that not what we should expect?* Because if we're comfortable with our lives, and with our sin, then stirring it up is going to make us uncomfortable!

But that is the first step. Because the comfort most people live with is a **false comfort**. A comfort based on what we *wish to be* rather than what really is. It is a **fragile comfort**, that can be upset very easily, by a tragedy, by a bad diagnosis, by the trouble of this world. It is an **uneasy comfort**, with thoughts and doubts and concerns that often plague the mind. Uneasy like the sleep you try to get when you have a thousand things on your mind – which you could *say* was sleep, but is really no sleep at all. . . . And so John comes to cut through all that. To (as Isaiah said) get rid of all the valleys and mountains and deserts we try to hide and neatly tuck away our sin in; to stir it up and lay it all bare. And with all that, **to prepare the way of the Lord**.

For if all that sin and evil stays tucked away and hidden in our hearts, we will not welcome the Lord when He comes – we will try to hide from Him! In shame and fear, like Adam and Eve. But with our sin stirred up and laid bare, with no place to hide, then when the Lord comes there is only one thing to do: repent. To confess it. To admit it. To agree with John. Yeah, it's mine. *I am a poor miserable sinner.*

And then John has us right where he wants us! For with confession and repentance comes true comfort. For then John's fiery speech gives way to speaking tenderly. The flames of sin are doused with the water of baptism. And what we deserve is trumped by grace. **And the way of the Lord is straight**. And the Lord comes straight to you not as Judge but as

Saviour. Not as Tyrant but as Shepherd. Not as Accuser, but as Forgiver. Not to pin your sins on you, but to take them away from you by pinning them on Himself. That you may know the comfort – the *true* comfort – of His love.

For there is only one way to silence the accusing voice of John the Baptist. The Pharisees objecting to him couldn't do it. King Herod throwing him in prison and then beheading him couldn't do it! Only death can silence John's accusing voice. And not John's death (Herod tried that!) – no, there is only one death that can silence John's accusing, pot stirring voice . . . **and that is the death of Jesus on the cross.** For it is the death of Jesus that swallows up our sin, our death, and all the accusing power of the devil, and comforts us with the message greater than John's – the message of forgiveness. And the sheep who know the voice of their Shepherd know His voice most there. His voice which tells us (to again use the words of Isaiah): ***“that [our] warfare is ended, that [our] iniquity is pardoned, that [we have] received from the Lord's hand double for all [our] sins.”***

And what is the ***“double for all our sins”*** that we have received? Not double punishment, but a double blessing – the forgiveness of all our sins, and a new life. For as John said in the Holy Gospel, ***“I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*** You see, the statement doesn't mean that John's baptism was empty; that it was only water; that it didn't really do anything. No! John's baptism was real, and it was for the forgiveness of sins. It pointed to the cross of Christ and the death of Jesus that there paid for our sins.

But, John wants you to know, **that's not all there is!** That's not the end of it. For Jesus' death was *followed* by His resurrection and ascension, and with His ascension was the promise to send *another comforter* – but not another John the Baptist (one of him is enough!) . . . but the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who not only gives us the comfort of the forgiveness of sins earned by Jesus on the cross, but who raises us from the death of our sins and gives us new life, even here and now. A new life not like the old life (full of sin!), but now full of grace and truth. A new life of righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. And new life of faith. . . . And thus have we been baptized – by water and the Spirit. And so the death and resurrection of Jesus, forgiveness, Holy Spirit, new life – *all of it, yours*. So that it is as we prayed, that *at Jesus' second coming, we may worship Him in purity*. With pure hearts – not with sin hidden, but with sin forgiven.

For that's what God wants. He wants you. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all working for you and your salvation. That's why we are here today; that's why Advent; that's why Christmas. That's why John the Baptist comes to stir up our hearts every year and make us uncomfortable! That we might turn from the false comfort of the world, and know the true comfort of Christ. The comfort of the Son of God whose flesh and blood – in the manger, and on the altar – is for us and for our salvation. That when He

comes again, we will not be hiding! We will be waiting . . . and we will be ready.

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.