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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Prophet of Repentant Joy”

Text: Matthew 11:2-15

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

Prophets give people what they **need**, not what they **want**. They are the vegetables, not the dessert. They are the socks and underwear under the tree instead of the toys and games. They are the practical, not the cool. They are about what’s good for us, and so prophets are about repentance. They’re not into self-affirmation, self-acceptance, or whatever other self-made, self-help spirituality is popular at any given time. Prophets speak the timeless and eternal truth of God’s Word. A Word for *all* people of *all* times and places. To give us what we need, not necessarily what we want.

And so the life of a prophet was not easy. They were not “*reeds shaken by the wind*,” influenced by whatever notions were blowing through the world. They were not “*dressed in soft clothing*,” because their lives were hard. They were ridiculed, spoken against, threatened, imprisoned, exiled, and often times martyred. Their reward was not in this life, but in the life of the world to come.

And so it was with the last prophet of the Old Testament; the last prophet who was sent to point to the coming Messiah – John the Baptist. Today’s Gospel finds him in prison for having the guts to tell King Herod what no one else would tell him: that it was wrong to steal your brother’s wife. It was a Word King Herod *needed* to hear, but didn’t *want* to hear. And so He threw John in prison – the kind of prison you normally didn’t leave alive. And soon, very soon, the Voice would be silenced as Herod would order his head removed from his body.

It was with such a future staring him in the face that John sends his disciples to Jesus with a question: “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*” It matters not so much whether John was asking these words for himself, or whether he sent his disciples to ask it for their own benefit, as a teaching device. Scholars continue

to debate that question, and I'm not going to get into it here. Because what matters for us today is that this question is here **for us**. To teach *us*. To show *us* the way of life. To point *us* to Christ: the Christ in the manger, the Christ on the cross, *and* the Christ who is coming again for us. **That we not silence the voice calling us to repentance and faith**, but be ready for our Lord when He comes. Both ready to live with Him at Christmas, and ready to live with Him forever.

Because we do try to silence the voice, don't we? (Little sinful kings of our own little kingdoms that we are!) We bite off the heads of those who dare disagree with us, with our harsh and angry words. Maybe like King Herod, we like the sins we're living with. Or do we ignore the voice because we think *others* need to hear it so much more than me. . . . But the voice of the prophets continues to sound forth - even here for you - because our Lord always provides what we need. And like King Herod, we need this voice. To bring us to repentance; to bring us to life. To the Life. To the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6)

And so John today is calling us to repentance - but not repentance the way we usually think of it: as turning from our sin in confession and faith. It *is* that, but even more. A bigger kind of repentance. A more encompassing repentance. For if repentance means literally "to change ones mind" (and it does!), then John wants us not only to change our thinking *about sin*, but to change *all* our thinking. That we stop thinking in worldly ways and begin thinking in godly and holy ways. These are the holy highways (Is 40; Mt 3) that John had come to prepare. Ways of thinking . . . about life, about death, and about what makes up our life. About what makes us happy. About what makes us rich. About what we yearn for. About what we cling to in this life. To help us think in a new way. That whether you are in prison like John, or in a prison of despair, or disappointment, or hopelessness, or suffering, or doubt, or whatever - that you realize **that the world can take your head, but it cannot take your life!** That the world can take your riches, but it cannot take your inheritance. That the world can take everything away from you, but it cannot take the one thing you need. Because Jesus is the one. The One who has come to bring a life that cannot be taken away.

And so Jesus replies to John's question: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them.*" And that last is the greatest of all. For Jesus here goes from the least to the greatest. Yes, there are wonderful *healings*. Even more than that, *the dead are raised up!* But greatest of all, *the*

poor have the good news preached to them. The good news of a Saviour. The good news of sins forgiven. The good news that no one can take away from them: that God has come in the flesh to save them.

That was the good news that John himself not only preached, but lived. And it is the good news and life that this season of Advent calls us to. To realize that *we* are the poor made rich – not by the world – but by our Saviour. For the world will give you many things, but it will not give its life for you. No, *that* the world demands from you, as payment from you for its perverse favors and temporary happiness. There are no free lunches, after all. No, the world seeks only its own life, at the expense of yours, mine, and anyone else who gets in the way. And how many sell their souls to have that life? That 15 minutes of fame, that moment of pleasure, that glimmer of glory?

How different . . . how very amazingly, extraordinarily different the Good News of our Saviour!! Who gave His life **for you**. Who at Christmas came **for you**, on Good Friday died **for you**, on Easter rose **for you**, who then ascended **for you**, is preparing an eternal home **for you**, and is coming back **for you**. That we who have no righteousness of our own have His righteousness. That we who have no lasting home have His home. That we who are poor be rich. Rich in grace, rich in hope, rich in faith – rich in riches not of this world. And when you are rich in that way, the riches of this world and life may come or go – it doesn't really matter. Your thinking has been changed. Your life is not here, but hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:3)

That is the Good News that John came to preach, that Christmas become more than just a one day party – a distraction from the real cares and concerns of life – but where we *see* our life. That we see in Jesus, the Son of God who was born a son of man, a picture of Holy Baptism, where we sons of men and born again as sons of God. That we see in Jesus, God hidden in the flesh, a picture of this Holy Supper, where the body and blood of Jesus are hidden – but really here! – for us to eat and to drink. That we see in Jesus, God who became small and weak for us, the very Gospel enfleshed – that He takes all that we are, and gives us all that He is. And that we see in Jesus, our Advent prayer answered: that *He has lightened the darkness of our hearts by His gracious visitation.* (Collect of the Day)

And so today John is calling to you. The Voice crying in the wilderness, the Voice calling from prison, is the Voice crying in Vienna, VA. Calling you to repentant

joy . . . which sounds like an oxymoron! Two words put together that are opposites. But in Christ, they're not. John shows us that. John, the prophet not just of repentance, but of joy! The prophet who leapt for joy in his mother's womb, who leapt for joy at the sight of his Saviour, and who is now leaping for joy in Heaven. This is the joy he wants for you. Not cheap joy, manufactured joy, imitation joy, or temporary joy, but true joy. The joy that disappointment or sadness cannot end. The joy that not even death can end. The joy of sins forgiven. The joy of life eternal. The joy of salvation assured. The true, repentant, joy of Christmas. The joy of Christ. The joy we need. The joy of which we sing this season: *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel [has] come to you, O Israel.* (LSB #357)

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.