

6 December 2009
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Gift of New Life”

Text: Luke 3:1-14 (Malachi 3:1-7b)

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. In our world, at this time of the year, it's advertisers who try to do that so you will buy stuff from them. In the Church, it's John the Baptist. Only he doesn't want you to buy anything - he wants you to repent. For, John knows, there is no other way to prepare for Jesus' coming, no other method, no other program. And so while we are in the throes of so many preparations for Christmas, John has come to preach to you and me and all the world: *don't just prepare for the holiday - prepare for your Saviour.* And John will not be ignored!

That's how it was when he first arrived on the scene too. St. Luke told us today 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 of the Jordan, 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, 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. 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 it's true nevertheless. For if we do not want to repent, there is no reason to celebrate Christmas. Rudolph, Frosty, the Grinch, Scrooge, George Bailey, one horse open sleighs, and the "spirits of the season" 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 some, "the most wonderful time of the year" can be the loneliest time of the year, or the costliest time of the year, or even the angriest time of the year.

And so it is exactly into these wildernesses – our wildernesses – that John the Baptist again comes. Not as the anti-Christmas, but to help us celebrate Christmas. John is not about what we *want* Christmas to be, but about what Christmas *is*. He is about real life, messy life, difficult life. Because Christmas is about real life. About your real, messy, difficult life, and about the real life that lay in the manger, in the midst of this messy, difficult world.

And so John the Baptist is back today, still, 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 really being talked about there, but the reality of your sin. Your sin which keeps digging you in deeper. Your sin which makes mountains out of molehills. Your sin which twists and perverts the words and motives and acts of others, and assumes the worst. Your sin which seeks to serve self while making the ways of others rough and difficult. This is the geography of your sin. This is your 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 straight talk and 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. For you see, John's message is twofold - yes, he preaches repentance, but even more, he points to the One *to whom* we confess and *in whom* there is the forgiveness of sins. And so with the hand of the Law he points *at* us, but with the hand of the Gospel he points us *to* Christ: our God made flesh for us. Our God wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Our God who grew up in the household of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. Our God who stood side-by-side with us sinners and was baptized for us as one of us. Our God who lived in our

wilderness for a while. Our God who was tempted in every way like us, and so knows the temptations that we face. Our God who was ridiculed and made fun of, and called demon-possessed. Our God who went to the cross for us. Who suffered and died for your sins, and then rose from the dead for you. Look! John says, ***behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.***

For Jesus did not come to provide us with a holiday, but with a holy day, that all our days be not “merry and bright,” but holy and right. That we live a *new* life. Not the same old life with Sunday clothes or Christmas clothes on, but a new life. A resurrection life. A life of faith, a life of forgiveness, a life of love.

And so again today, John the Baptist is knocking on your head and your heart. It’s his job. For he wants you to celebrate Christmas. And so he is pointing you to the Christ. And you celebrate the Christ not by trying to hold the baby in the manger in your arms and “have Him in *your* heart,” but by being held by Him in His heart and in His nail-pierced hands. You celebrate not by trying to wash and feed Him (as if you could!), but by being washed by Him at His font and fed by Him at His altar. You celebrate not by trying to speak to Him, but by hearing Him speak to you in His Word. And when that happens, *its Christmas* – not one day, but every day. The Word made flesh, coming to you, that you receive His gift of forgiveness and life.

And that you might receive that gift, that is why John the Baptist comes. Yes, his message is 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 and jump right to the joy of Christmas. But if the world teaches us anything, it is that jumping right to the joy of Christmas is jumping to a joy that does not last. And so John comes, to help you out. To show you a better way and joy, a lasting way and joy. And through the Word proclaimed today, his voice continues to be “***the voice crying in [this] wilderness,***” the voice calling us to repentance and faith, until that voice is no longer needed, when the God who came first as a child in flesh and blood in a manger will return in the same flesh and blood on the clouds in glory at the end of time.

Until then, John’s back, and it’s good that he is. Do not change the channel, close the door, or ignore his call. Listen to him. Repent, and receive the gift of God: the Word made flesh, and the forgiveness and life that He 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.