

13 December 2009
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Turning Darkness into Light”

Text: Luke 7:18-35 (Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7)

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

John the Baptist was in prison. Perhaps he had been rotting in there for some time now. His crime? Speaking the truth and pointing to Jesus as ***the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*** (John 1:29)

Meanwhile, John’s disciples heard that up in Galilee, Jesus had healed the near-death son of a *Roman* centurion, and just by speaking a word. Jesus had raised a widow’s son from the dead, again, just by speaking a word. And they wondered: *what about John?* How come He’s not rescuing John just by speaking a word? John is His promised, prophetic forerunner, come to prepare the way before Him. How come Jesus is letting him rot in prison?

So they go to John and report all these things - maybe even thinking that if Jesus only knew that John was in prison down here in Jerusalem, Jesus would speak a word for him, too. So they speak to John, and John says: *go ask Him.* Ask Him, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”***

That question is evidence not of John’s dejection and confusion, but that even in prison, he is still pointing the way to Jesus. Because John knew. He was not looking for a soft, easy life. He was no reed shaken by the wind. John was miraculously born to be a prophet and his father was priest, so you can be sure he knew his Old Testament. The Old Testament which testifies that rejection and prison and death was the fate of all the prophets. This is what John meant when he said: *Jesus must increase; but I must decrease.* (John 3:30) Not that his decrease would mean a nice, easy life of retirement and enjoying the fruits of his labor when Jesus takes over, but that he would die. He would die a prophet’s death.

And so John was decreasing, but even as he did, the darkness of his prison was enlightened by the light of knowing that his *decrease* would soon mean the *increase* to the joy of heaven. For as Jesus said: ***the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.*** And soon, John knew, he would join them in that greatness.

That (by the way) is why we always celebrate Christian saints and martyrs on the date of their death - not to commemorate their death, but to celebrate their birthday into the kingdom of heaven. And so rejoice with them.

But that is a hard thing for John's disciples to understand. And so they do as John told them, go to Jesus, and ask: ***Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*** John knew what he was doing. For when we get too limited in our perspective, too stuck in our own problems, too self-absorbed and self-centered, and filled with doubts and questions, we need to be pointed away from ourselves to something greater. To someone greater. And so John sends them off from the darkness of his dungeon to see the Light of the world. That as we prayed earlier: *the darkness of their hearts may be enlightened by His gracious visitation.*

For that is the true darkness - the darkness of the heart. Of hearts filled with doubt and sin. Yes, there is much darkness in our world: crimes and hatred, disease and suffering, hunger, neglect, and persecution. But these are but the fruits of hearts filled with sin. Sin that wells up and bursts forth its darkness and death into the world. Bursting *upon* you, but also bursting *from* you. Yes, from you too, good Christian. No one is immune. From you too come thoughts, words, and deeds that hurt, that imprison, that embitter, that humiliate, that neglect, that lash out, that kill.

And when that darkness descends upon us, or when we see it in our own hearts and lives, it is a hard thing to understand. Is Jesus the Saviour . . . my Saviour? If so, then . . . why? Why does He not speak a word? ***Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*** Many are asking that question still today.

So how does Jesus answer that question? He preaches the good news to John's disciples. For like the others who gathered around Him, they were the poor who needed it. And so through His works and His words, Jesus raises them from their prison house of sin and doubt, and enlightens their hearts. They see with their eyes and hear with their ears what John knows: that *here* is the healer of every ill, the destroyer of death, and the forgiver of sins. Those disciples walking in darkness have seen a great light. (Isaiah 9:2) The light no darkness can overcome. (John 1:5) The Light of Christ.

And John, the forerunner, has prepared the way of the Lord yet again. *Even in chains.* And I cannot help but wonder if he was still there when his disciples returned, or if Herod had beheaded him while they were gone. Perhaps John entered glory even as his disciples were beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus. (2 Cor 4:6)

And now, dear Christian, *this is the glory that has been revealed to you.* The glory not of kings or an easy life, but the glory of our God who has come to battle our

enemies, our demons, our darkness and sins, and win. To give not just His head, but His whole life, as the sacrifice for your sin. That no matter how dark the darkness of the world around you, and no matter how dark your heart, that His light shatter the darkness and give you the light of life. The light no darkness can overcome. So that no matter the darkness you find yourself in - no matter the dungeon, the illness, the oppression, the sadness, doubt, or fear - you be not alone. But that like John, *you know*. You know there is a healer of every ill, a defeater of death, and a forgiver of every sin. And not just a Saviour from these things, but your Saviour.

For the Son of God came in your flesh, took your sin, died your death, and rose to life again, and then He baptized you, that His life and forgiveness be yours. That in those waters, Jesus work and speak the light of faith upon you, raise you to life, and give you peace. And so He has. That even in darkness you can have confidence and hope. *For He is the one who has come, and there is no other.* And you need no other.

For He is the one who comes not once, but is still coming to you, feeding you with His body and blood, to give you His strength for your weakness, His righteousness for your sin, and His life for your death. That at this altar, Jesus work and speak the light of faith upon you, that you walk in the light of His life. And so He has. That even in darkness you spew forth not sin, but good works of love and forgiveness from the love and life of Christ that now lives in you.

And so, you see, Jesus did (and does!) speak a word for us, too - for John, for His disciples, for you and me. Not against the darkness of the world, but against the true darkness, of your heart. He speaks His word of forgiveness. To scatter the darkness not around you, but the darkness in you. That you have His light not just in a place or for a time, but in every place and at *all* times.

And so as the prophet Zephaniah told us this morning, ***“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!”*** That’s you! Why? Because ***“the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you with his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.”*** Did you hear that? He rejoices over you! Yes, *you*. He exults over you! Yes, *you*. And He will quiet you with His love. Whatever the tumult, the doubt, the despair - He will quiet you like a babe in His arms. For once He was a babe in the arms of His mother Mary, and He knew the tumult of the cross, so that you never would. And even in that very moment, that hour of darkness, there was joy in His heart. Joy for you. That through His work and His word, you would have life. Life now, and life forever.

And that is the joy that gives us joy, and gives *Joy to the World*. That enables us to,

as Paul said, "**Rejoice in the Lord always.**" Not because things will always be merry and bright, because they won't. But because your God rejoices over you. Yes, *you*. The joy that brought Him down at Christmas, the joy that led Him to ascend the cross, and the joy that brings Him down to you today. To speak a word to us poor, miserable, wretched sinners, and say: *Fear not; your sins are forgiven. You are mine.* And so you are.

And so in Advent, at Christmas, and all through our lives, His joy gives us joy. For if your Saviour rejoices over you, you are richer than the richest and higher than the highest. So let the darkness rage! It cannot win. The Light of the world has come, and He is shining upon 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.