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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Real Chorus of Praise”

Text: Matthew 11:2-15 (Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-11)

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

There have been some videos going around the internet lately of the *Hallelujah Chorus* being sung in unusual places. Perhaps you have seen them. While people are going about their Christmas shopping or eating in a food court, all of a sudden the members of a choir - who have secretly infiltrated and spread throughout the crowd - begin singing. Loudly. At first, the people don't realize what's going on, and look quite surprised. But they catch on soon enough, and realize they are getting more than they expected that day.

That was not the case, however, with the folks who went out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach. He had not secretly infiltrated at all, but from the beginning went about loudly proclaiming a *Hallelujah Chorus* all his own, as he cried out for people to repent, and to “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).

In fact, to hear him preach is exactly why the people went out. For Jesus asked them: “***What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?***” Someone who is blown this way and that by the winds of popular opinion and political correctness? No, that is not why they went.

“***What then did you go out to see?***” Jesus continues. “***A man dressed in soft clothing?***” Someone successful and admired and among the elite of the world? Well, no. “***Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.***” Not in the wilderness.

“***What then did you go out to see? A prophet?***” Yes, that's exactly who they went out to see - a man who speaks the Word of God; who speaks not what we want to hear, but what we need to hear; who speaks the eternal truth - a message much different than the words so often heard in the world. The world's flattery, lies, and seductive words that seek only to manipulate and deceive. John's words were filled with refreshing truth, even if they were hard to hear.

So what they did not expect, then, was for this great messenger to be languishing in

Herod's dundgeon. And not only the people, but John's own disciples, did not expect this. Though they probably should have. ***The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*** This is what has always happens to the prophets God sends to His people. The message of sin and rebellion and the need for repentance is not always warmly received. Then, or now.

So what does John do? He does not change his tune, but sends his disciples to the Lamb Himself. *Go ask Jesus*, he says, not because he needed an answer - but because they did. For while John's chorus would soon end, Jesus' was just beginning. And so when John heard that Jesus had burst onto the scene - in the food courts and shopping plazas of Judea - he sends his disciples to hear this new song from the lips of the Lamb Himself. And what a *Hallelujah Chorus* they heard! ***"The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."*** Just as Isaiah had prophesied, so it was now being fulfilled. Yes, Jesus is ***"the one who was to come!"*** Yes, and now it is John's disciples who get to sing this chorus of praise themselves. And it was music to John's ears.

Sometimes that music gets drowned out, though, doesn't it? By life. When your heart is weighed down with griefs and cares and you can't understand what's going on. When you think you can't take it anymore - another sickness, another death, another trial or challenge in your life. When your sin burdens you with guilt, and life just seems too heavy a load to bear. You snap at loved ones who don't deserve it, and wonder why in this season of joy . . . joy seems so elusive. You didn't even see it coming; it all infiltrated so unexpectedly.

You see, that's why we need John, still today. We need John to send us to Jesus and ask: ***And you the coming one?*** Are you coming for *me*? For me in the dundgeon; for me in the darkness; for me in my confusion and pain; for me, a poor, miserable sinner? We need joy to break forth in our lives. And so you have come here this morning. To behold the Lamb of God. To hear Him. To hear *His* chorus of love and forgiveness. To hear that yes, Jesus has come **for you**. That you may live and rejoice in Him.

So hear what Jesus has to say to *you*, in answer to *your* questions: ***Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.***

What does this mean?

There is no question that John was great. He was the last and greatest Old Testament prophet. He was the one who prepared the way of the Lord. Yet there is one greater than John. Who is it? Who is it who is ***least in the kingdom of heaven?***

That question confuses us sometimes, and so we miss out on the joy Jesus' teaching is meant to bring us here. We think that the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is someone who is in heaven, and John's on earth, and so yeah, that one's greater. Not much comfort for *us* there. But we learned last week that the kingdom of heaven is not just heaven, but wherever the King is doing His kingly work; where Jesus is ruling all things for the good of His Church.

Well, don't feel bad - the disciple didn't understand all this either, and so a little later they are arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest, and they ask Jesus: "**Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?**" Do you remember how He answered them? He called a little child over and put him in the middle of them and said, "**Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**" (Matt 18:1-4). Now, that doesn't mean those who are cute and innocent. Rather, children then were seen as those who couldn't offer anything, who needed care, and were a burden because they couldn't contribute to the support of the family. *This, Jesus says, is a picture of greatness in the kingdom of heaven.*

So putting two and two together here . . . who are those who are greater than the great John? It is those who are the least in this world. Those who have nothing to offer, those who need care, those who are a burden; those we heard of earlier: **the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead** - *can't get much more helpless than that!* - **and the poor**. Not the materially poor, but the spiritually poor, for they **have the good news preached to them**. They are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, for they receive the service and gifts and greatness of the king.

And we could add one more to that list today: you. You in the dundgeon of despair and sadness; you in confusion and pain; you who are lonely; you who are heavy laden by the cares and concerns of the world; you who are a poor, miserable sinner. **Yes, Jesus is the coming one, for He has come for you**. For *in* you and *for* you He is doing His kingly work, serving you with His forgiveness and life, washing away your sins, and making you His child. You who have nothing to offer Him but your burdens and sins. But these are the very things He wants! To set you free. And that is exactly what He has done in His death and resurrection. **He is never more King for you than He is for you there** - on the cross, and on that morning three days later.

And He is never more king for you than where that death and resurrection are for you today. For Jesus has not ascended and left you to wonder where He is, and where is His work for you now. No, He is still the coming one, coming with His death and resurrection for you, to raise you to new life in Holy Baptism, to give you forgiveness and life in Holy Absolution, and to feed and strengthen you with His own living Body and Blood in His Holy Supper. And here, through these means,

His hand is still cleansing, still healing, still feeding, still raising, still forgiving. And here, it is not a secret, hidden choir that breaks out in a chorus of praise, but the very angels and archangels and all the company of heaven whose praise we join. Like John's disciples, breaking out in a chorus of joy all our own for our Saviour King, who - yes! - is here for us.

Jesus says one more thing here, also. ***Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*** For sadly, yes, this great service offends some people. Who do not want to be the least. Who want to offer God their own greatness and achievements. Who do not want to see these gifts of God as gifts to the poor and lowly to serve us, but as things we do for God to serve Him. But blessed are those who are not offended - who see their sin, who know their need - and so receive the King here, the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. Who takes away your sin.

And that is the chorus of praise we will sing until what we see here, now, by faith, we see, in the end, in glory. The difference will not be in our King. Our Saviour who comes to us now is our Saviour who will come in the end. The difference will be in us. For while we now live in a world of sin and sadness, pain and death, it will not be so then. Rather, as Isaiah said:

***[T]he ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.***

Until then, James encourages us, ***be patient***. Like the farmer who plants his seed and prays for rain. It may be a rainy day for you now, of clouds and gloom, but the harvest is coming. It is, in fact, breaking in even now, in churches around the world. Calling out to those tired of shopping for spirituality and hungering and thirsting for righteousness, that your Saviour is here. He is here for you. And not just at Christmas, but always. To lift your gloom and sadness, and give you joy and gladness. That you, too, join the chorus of Christians who have infiltrated - not a food court or a shopping center - but who have infiltrated the whole world, in schools and businesses, in homes, and even in dungeons - wherever you are, raising a chorus of praise and good works to our King. A Christ gift, all year round, to the world.

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.