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Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Want to Really Celebrate Christmas?”
Text: Malachi 3:1-7b; Luke 3:1-14

[After a particularly long and arduous week, a reworking of a sermon from yesteryear . . .]

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

It happens this time every year. Advertising. Advertisers trying to get into your head. And they're relentless. Try as you might to get rid of them or ignore them, they just keep coming back, they keep confronting you, they keep putting themselves in your mind. So you will buy stuff from them. They stuff our mailboxes, our e-mailboxes, our eyes and ears and even sometimes our noses. To get in your mind. So that when you shop you will think of them first.

It happens this time every year . . . John the Baptist. He keeps coming back to get in your mind. He keeps coming back to fill your ears. He doesn't want you to buy anything - he wants you to **repent**. For, John knows, there is not only no *better* way to prepare for Jesus' coming, there is no *other* way - no other way to be ready for the coming of the king. 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. To get into our heads: *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 if he were here today, he'd be doing the same thing. He'd be going all around the region of Fairfax County, and proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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 nonetheless. For if you do not want to repent, there is no reason to celebrate Christmas. No reason to celebrate the coming of a *Saviour*. All the extra stuff our world has added to Christmas can only take you so far, and often takes us away from what the season is really all about. And because of that, for many, what is supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year" turns into the loneliest time of the year, or the saddest, or costliest, or even 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 a messy, difficult world.

And so John the Baptist is back today, still, to "*Prepare the way of the Lord, mak[ing] his paths straight. That every valley be filled, and every mountain and hill be made low, and the crooked become straight, and the rough places 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. And mine.

But our Lord has come to undo all that we in sin do. 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. He has come to rescue us from our sin.

And so repent, John says. Repent, turn away from this 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 who would do all this.

And so with the hand he points at us with the Law, and with the other hand he points at Christ with the Gospel. He reminds us of those words from Malachi that ***“I, the Lord, do not change, therefore you are not consumed.”*** We deserve to be consumed. But He and His promise does not change. Therefore our God is 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 you, and so knows the temptations that you face. Our God who was ridiculed and made fun of, and called demon-possessed. Our God who went to the cross for you. Who suffers and dies for your sins, and then rises from the dead for you. Look at that! John says. Because the Lord does not change, therefore, Christ! Because the Lord does not change, *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, an eternal day, that will never end. That all our days not necessarily be “merry and bright,” but holy and right. That as John taught those who came to him and asked “*What then shall we do?*” the answer be that we live a *new* life. Not the same old life that you lived before; the same old life with Sunday clothes or Christmas clothes or even Christian clothes on, but a new life. A resurrection life. A life of faith, a life of forgiveness, a life of love. Living in the callings God has graciously given us, and in those callings living by faith and giving the love and forgiveness our Saviour has so graciously given to us.

And so again today, John. He comes and once again knocks on your head and your heart. It’s his job. For he wants you to celebrate Christmas - as I have been saying so much these past few weeks - *with a view toward the end*. So he is pointing you to the Christ. The One who was once held in His mother’s arms and hands, who now holds you in His arms and His nail-pierced hands. The One who once had to be washed and fed by his mother, who now washes you in the font and feeds you at the altar. The One who once grew and learned to speak like us, who now speaks to us His Word of truth. *Especially* His “I forgive you all your sins.” And when that happens, *it’s 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 receive that gift, that’s what John the Baptist is all about; that’s why he 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. 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 here to stay, and it's good that he is. Do not change the channel, close the door, or ignore his call. Listen to him. Buy your presents, put up your tree, enjoy the music, spend time with family and friends . . . but also *listen*. Listen to John and repent. And listen to the child, the Word made flesh. And listening, receive! Receive His gifts, His forgiveness and life, that He now comes 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.