

10 December 2006
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Straighten Up!”
Text: Luke 3:1-20

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

Straighten up! When my father said that to me, I knew what he meant! (And I knew that he meant business!) When I bark that at my kids, they know what it means too. We all do. The message is simple, clear, and direct – we’re doing something wrong, and we need to change our ways. We need to stop, turn around, and straighten up our lives.

Today, that is the message to us from our *Heavenly* Father through the voice of John the Baptist. *Straighten up!* And we know what he means, don’t we? We’re sinners, and we need to change our ways. We need to stop, repent, and straighten up our lives.

And so that is what we prayed for today, in the Collect of the Day, earlier: *Stir up our hearts, O Lord.* Stir them up like a pot of soup, and get all that junk, all that sin, that has settled deep down in our hearts, and stir it up! Make us uncomfortable. Help us see our sin that we may repent. Because the Lord is coming. Yes, He is coming, and we need to be ready.

So our Father sends His messenger to do just that for us. John the Baptist. The one foretold by Isaiah and Malachi. He comes to us in Advent every year. And he’s on the cover of our bulletin today . . . or, what he might have looked like. It’s kind of a scary picture! But so is our sin.

And you know, when you saw that bulletin cover, I bet I know what you thought! Because *I* thought it, and our *world* thinks it: not very “Christmassy!” Even if you don’t want all the *fluff* the world fills these days with, still, how about a nice picture of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; the peaceful manger scene. Wouldn’t that really help us get ready for Christmas better than *this* [pointing to bulletin cover] guy?

Well, **no**. For *without* John the Baptist, Jesus is just another cute baby born to proud parents, and Christmas is just another holiday that ends on December 26th, when all the special music *stops* and the stores *start* tearing down their displays until next year. But

with John the Baptist, and his preaching preparing us, we see Jesus for who He is: our Saviour. The one who has come to save us from our sins. And Christmas, then, doesn't end on December 26th, but continues. For this work of this child continues, all through our lives.

For, you see, the season of Advent isn't really here to prepare us to welcome the child born in the manger. He's already come! Some 2,000 years ago. No, Advent is to prepare us to welcome our Lord when He comes again. In glory. For when the grown up baby in the manger returns as King and Judge. And for that day, we need John. For that day, we need repentance. For that day, we need to *straighten up!* For as we heard: ***every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.***

Now that's a bit unsettling, isn't it? Does that stir up your hearts a bit? It should! That's a bit more serious than the ol': *he's making a list and checking it twice!* For the truth is that we don't always produce the good fruit, the good works, our Lord expects. We don't always try so hard, and even when we do, old habits, bad habits, die hard. It's much easier to love ourselves than to love others; to serve ourselves and help ourselves, instead of serving and helping others. It just comes naturally to us to lash out in anger when we're hurt, to return evil with evil, and repay injury with injury. It's easier to cut people down rather than build them up; to put off our Lord and His Word; to get wrapped up and consumed by our own lives.

Or in short, it's hard to straighten up! Our lives and our hearts. It's just so much easier to let things be as they are; to ignore the problems; to not stir the pot . . .

So thanks, Father, for sending us John. To not only *stir up* our hearts, but to *smash* our cold, hard hearts with the hammer of your Law! Because You know that's the only way. You know that if left to ourselves, we *would* never, *could* never, do it. So thank you that you give us the **cross**, before you give us the **joy**.

For that is how it was with the baby in the manger. First the cross, then the glory. Bethlehem wasn't really the idyllic, peaceful scene we make it out to be these days. His life was full of hardship and rejection. And then, the cross. To lay down His life for our sins. To take the suffering and death that is rightly ours because of our crooked, rebellious lives. That we might live. That we be forgiven. That His blood wash us clean, straighten us out, and give us a home and a joy that we could never have apart from Him.

That is why the Son of God came. And that is why He is still coming, and working in us, today. To give us those *gifts*, that we could never have apart from Him. To give us joy, and a life of meaning and purpose. To fill in the valleys of our despair. To bring down

the mountains of our pride. To straighten out our crooked ways.

Now, what exactly that means for you I cannot tell you. For it means different things to different people, depending on who you are and where you are in life. You can tell that from John's instructions to those who hear his preaching. For tax collectors, the way of the Lord meant being honest. For soldiers, it meant being content and not taking what didn't belong to them. And for everyone, it meant generosity and mercy, giving food and clothing to those who had none, for Jesus' sake. And for you . . . ? As a father or mother, a son or daughter, a worker or boss, a friend or neighbor . . .

And know, that road – the way of the Lord – may be difficult! It may have some unexpected twists and turns. It might lead through some pretty rocky terrain and rough territory and places we'd really rather not go! The road of faith may even lead you out into some desert places, where it seems you have to walk alone, all by yourself.

But you are not by yourself! For the One who has given you your faith, the One who has ***baptized you with the Holy Spirit and fire***, the One who has given you His Word, the One who feeds you with His very own body and blood . . . does not abandon you or leave you. It is He who does *what you cannot do* – not only on the cross, but in your heart, to forgive you, change you, renew you, and yes, *straighten* you out. He who left His Father's throne in Heaven to be born in lowly meekness, to be cradled in a cattle trough and wrapped in swaddling clothes, is closer in His Word to you than a little child with her arms wrapped around her mother's neck.

Yes, this One who came once for you, is still here for you, that your stirred up sin be taken away, your life changed (for the better!), and to give you joy. Not temporary, fleeting, once a year, joy – but permanent, lasting, never-ending joy. That our celebrations of the new life of Christmas here, might be only the beginning of our celebration of new life in Heaven, forever. For He who was faithful in coming as the babe of Bethlehem, will also be faithful in coming again at the end, ***and all flesh will see the salvation of God.***

So get ready! For Christmas, yes. But also for your Lord. Do not be like Herod, rejecting the voice and throwing him out of his heart and into prison! Repent. Receive His straightening forgiveness. Come to His Table. For while Christmas comes but once a year, your Saviour comes for you everyday, to make you new and straight and whole and free.

Hark! A thrilling Voice is Sounding. (LSB #345) Yes, and it will soon sound again . . .

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.

(Some of the thoughts and words used in this sermon from Rev. Harold Senkbeil, *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 17 No. 1, CPH, p. 20-21, 24)