

11 December 2011  
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Who Are You?”

Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thess 5:16-24

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

John the Baptist just doesn't fit the mold. We heard last week of his unusual diet: locusts and wild honey, and his unusual clothes: a camel's hair shirt with a leather belt. His preaching is also a bit unusual: he is out in the wilderness instead of in the city (where the people are) or the temple (where they go to get religion), and he doesn't preach what people want to hear - that they're okay, and, keep up the good work! No, he cries: You're not okay! You're not good! Repent! *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Matthew 3:2). There was nothing usual about John.

And that continues in the Holy Gospel we heard today. For in response to those who came to him to find out who he was and what he was doing and why he was doing what he was doing, John defines himself and his work not by who he is, but by another - by Jesus. Everything John is is in relation to Jesus. Without Jesus, John is nothing. Without Jesus, John's work is in vain. For John, Jesus must increase and he must decrease (John 3:30).

Now, John did have a pedigree. He was the son of Zechariah the priest and so he was a descendant of Aaron in the priestly line of Israel - that was no small thing. But instead of telling the folks who came to question him who he was, he tells them who he is not - he is not the Christ nor Elijah nor the promised prophet greater than Moses. John is the great NOT, so that he can point to the one who IS; to the one who is everything.

And that, I think, is what makes John so unusual - even more than his diet and his clothes. For I think it is part and parcel of the sin that has curved us in on ourselves that we define ourselves by what we do, or who we want to be. For example, when we meet someone, one of our first questions is: *What do you do?* That defines a person. And there are so many things we want to do, to make something out of ourselves. We want to be successful, we want to be beautiful, we want to be smart, or popular, or powerful, or educated, or about a million other things people tell us we should be, and we therefore try to be.

Now, let me be clear - it's good and not wrong to have goals and try to achieve and

use the gifts and talents God has given you. The problem is when that *defines* you; when that's all there is for you. For not only does God get inevitably squeezed out of the picture, but defining yourself this way can so easily rob you of joy. The joy of living. The joy your Lord designed for you. Because very few attain these things we are told we should be, and even if they do, they get some and not others, or the standards change, or conditions change, and so there's always more to get, more to do, more to achieve, and your life ends up being an exhausting, never-ending chase for this more, leaving little time or room for anything else.

So maybe John had it right. Don't define yourself by who you are and what you do - look at who you are by another, by Jesus. And that not only in the world, but also who you are spiritually. For spiritually, who you are on your own is a sinner and what you do is sin. We do those things we're not supposed to do, and we don't do those things we are supposed to do - maybe because we're so busy chasing after all that stuff I was just talking about! All that stuff we're told we're supposed to be and supposed to do and supposed to have. All that stuff that winds up consuming us - both physically and spiritually.

But being defined by Jesus shines a whole new light on things. For then you're not just who you say you are or who others say you are - you are who Jesus says you are. You are His child. You are forgiven. You are dearly loved. You are well pleasing to Him. And you are all these things not because of anything in you, or anything you have done, but because of what Jesus has come to do for you; because you are baptized. Which is, by the way, what John was all about.

That's the good news John lived and proclaimed, fulfilling Isaiah's words as the forerunner of Christ. And so as we heard from Isaiah earlier today, John ***brings good news to the poor*** - to you who cannot live up to all the "supposed to be's." He ***binds up the brokenhearted*** - you whose hearts have been broken and stomped on. He ***proclaims liberty to the captives*** - to you held captive to the expectations and demands of others. He ***comforts all who mourn*** - you who mourn over your sins and failures. John is ***proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor***, and ***the day of vengeance for our God*** - notice how much greater is His favor than His vengeance! That's the lifetime of favor won for you when He poured out His vengeance against sin upon Jesus that day on the cross. There all that you are supposed to be and should be is swallowed up by the one who IS - *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). Who takes away your sin and sets you free. Free in His love, free in His forgiveness, free to live.

*That's why John loved His job!* It wasn't easy, and . . . well . . . the food and clothes and living conditions definitely weren't the perks that made it all worth it! What did make it worth it was the one who was *coming*. The one who had come six months after him, born of the virgin Mary and laid in the manger. The one coming to be the

sacrifice for the sin of the world on the cross. The one coming to fulfill the promise of God to firmly and finally place His heel upon the serpent's head, that Satan have no more dominion over us and be defeated once and for all. That's why John was filled with joy. That's why John was like a little kid at Christmas when Jesus came out to him to be baptized. For though I don't know for sure, I'll bet he was jumping up and down and couldn't contain himself as he cried out: *There He is! The Lamb of God! The promised Saviour!*

That joy is why we light the rose color candle today, for our Advent preparation makes a turn today - turning now to the joy of the coming one. That John's joy be our joy. A joy that enables us to live as St. Paul is describing in his letter to the Thessalonians. If you're consumed with all the "supposed to be's," the things that Paul writes of will all fade into the background, get lost in the shuffle, and pale in importance. But if you're consumed by "what Jesus has done for you," or rather, if you consume all that Jesus has done for you when you come and consume Him, His Body and Blood, given to you to eat and drink here, and consume His Word as you read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, then all these things are your joy, just like for John. ***Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks in all circumstances, holding fast to what is good.*** For Jesus is working in you, ***sanctifying you and keeping your whole spirit and soul and body blameless*** until He comes again. He is faithful. He is surely doing it.

*And so that is who you are.* A dearly loved and forgiven child of God. Sanctified, or made holy by Him. Being kept by Him. A bride of the Bridegroom. No longer a slave to sin, but set free to live in Christ. To answer with John's joy those who ask you who you are and what you are doing. And to see at Christmas not just the birth of someone who lived very long ago and very far away, but to see your own new birth. For the Son of God was born a son of man, that we sons of men might be born as sons of God. And you are, in Him. For you are who Jesus says you are, and in Holy Baptism, and through His Word, and in His Supper, He has called you by that name that is above every name, and given you an identity second to none: *Christian.*

And so it is as we have been singing all this season: We rejoice! *Rejoice, for Emmanuel has come to you, O Israel!* (LSB #357)

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.