

Jesu Juva

“John’s Advent Gift For You”

Text: Mark 1:1-8 (Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14)

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

John the Baptist. We heard about him today, as we always do the Second Sunday of Advent. He is the advent prophet. He was born for advent. He was born for the coming of the Lord. To be the forerunner. To prepare the way for Him among us.

Now most of the time when we hear about John, the focus is either on his appearance, his diet, or his fiery preaching. For his appearance, as we heard, was quite unusual - being *clothed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist*. Not very luxurious or comfortable. And his diet was even more noteworthy - yummy, crunchy *locusts and wild honey*. And his preaching - he held nothing back, calling sinners sinners, those who thought they were pretty good a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7), and even calling out the kings and princes of his day. John spared no one. And if he were here today, he’d go after you and your sins too. Unlike many people in our day and age who mince words, use vague language, and try to give themselves as much wiggle room as possible, not John. You knew who John was and what he stood for.

But having said all that, here’s what often gets overlooked or unsaid (it seems to me) about John, even though it is the most obvious fact about him: **he baptized!** Even though that’s in the name most people know him by - John the Baptist or John the baptizer - how often do we neglect to consider *how much he loved to baptize*. And that he wanted to baptize everyone. John, you see, had this incredible gift from God - *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* - and he wanted to give it to everyone.

That’s why he did what he did. That’s why he preached repentance. That’s why he called out those who would not repent or be baptized, yes, using some pretty strong language. Even when King Herod put him in prison, he wouldn’t stop preaching to Herod (Mark 6) - not just to convince Herod that he was wrong and that he, John, was right - but that Herod too might repent and receive this gift from God. Forgiveness. He wanted to give this gift to everyone, even though not all would have it.

And John was wildly popular because of it. For, Mark tells us, *all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him*. Not just a few people, but hordes. And how delighted John must have been! Most of the time he’s depicted as this mean angry guy (like on our bulletin cover!), but maybe he was actually happy and joyful as he was baptizing! Giving the gift of God’s forgiveness to so many.

So hordes of people went out to him, to receive this gift. John preached it and how much the people needed it, and his preaching resonated with the people because they knew, from the Law that is written on all hearts (Romans 2:15) that they - that we - are sinners. I really don't think that's a news flash to most people. People know they do wrong things. Most people have regrets. It's why so many keep making New Year's resolutions every year. Preaching - John's and the Church's still today - teaches us the depth and breadth of our sin and how serious it is, far more than we know! But the real question is this: not whether or not you are a sinner, but *what are you going to do about it?*

There are a few options. Two of the most popular are: (1.) try to fix yourself - do better, try harder, and come up with more effective ways of doing so; or (2.) deny it - cover it up or make yourself feel better by comparing yourself to others and convincing yourself you're not so bad. Even Christians do those things. You've done those things. But they don't work. Fixing yourself is like the little boy trying to fix the leaks in the dam by putting his finger into the hole, but then another hole springs up, and another and another. That's the way of sin with us - just when you think you've got one under control, more break out, and you don't have enough fingers and toes for them all. Not even close! And denying it - that might make you feel better for a while, but that's like filing an extension on your income tax. Sooner or later that bill's going to come due.

But here's what *John* said: **let God deal with it.** Now at first, that sounds a bit frightening, like pleading guilty in court and then comes the sentencing. But it's different, John said. For here is *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. Here God deals with your sins by taking them away, forgiving them. And that's the solution that works no matter who you are, what you've done, or when you've lived. What you can't do and could never do, God *is coming* to do for you. He promised. He promised this from the beginning, from the very first sin, and now the time *has come* for it to be accomplished! That's what John also said: He's *coming* - now! For *after me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

And so John came then and comes now, not just to convict you of your sin, but to point you to the One who deals with your sins. Reminding us in these days before Christmas that the baby in the manger whose birth we are about to celebrate came to be your sin-bearer. The mightier One made weak and the holy One made sinful, to join you who are weak and sinful and raise you to His life. To give you what you need. To give you His Spirit and join you to Himself, to be with you where you are, and that where He is you may be also - from the cross, to the grave, to the resurrection, to the ascension. That you die with Him and rise with Him and ascend with Him to live in His kingdom in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness forever. That's what filled John with joy - that One and His gift. And so John points you to Him that you be filled with that same joy.

But it wasn't only John - he was just one in a long line of pointers to Christ. Like Isaiah. ***Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*** Isaiah says it twice to emphasize the comfort. This is what God wants to do for you and why He sent prophets like Isaiah and John. To comfort you. To proclaim to you that the ***warfare is over*** and ***your iniquity pardoned.*** To be this ***herald of good news.*** That though your life is like the grass of the field - here today and gone tomorrow - you know you have a God who is greater and mightier than anything in this world, even death. A God, a Saviour, who, Isaiah says, ***will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*** So lift up your voice and rejoice! *He is coming to you.*

And then we also heard from Peter today. He addressed the fact that I mentioned last week - that we've been waiting for Jesus to come back for some 2,000 years now and so far, He hasn't come. Which makes some scoff at us and think this belief stupid. If it hasn't happened yet, it ain't gonna happen. But Peter tells us what Isaiah and John told us - Jesus is waiting in order to give His gifts more! To give His forgiveness more, to give Himself more. He's waiting so ***that all should reach repentance*** - which is to say *not only* repentance, but ***repentance for the forgiveness of sins***, as John preached and did.

So, Peter says, you, while you too are waiting, ***be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*** How do we do that? John told us today: **baptism.** By remembering that you are baptized and by living in your baptism. For when you are baptized you have Jesus' promise of forgiveness and life - the forgiveness that removes your spots and blemishes and gives you peace. That you not despair over your sin. That you *acknowledge* it, repent of it, but then rejoice in the One who has come and borne your sin for you and taken it all away from you. To set you free. That's how you prepare to meet Him when He comes again in glory.

And that repentance includes not only the sin you know, but the sin you know not; not only the sin you've done, but the sin you've denied or tried to make up for on your own; the whoppers and the little white lies; the sins you think no one knows and the sin you thought you got away with. And so we prayed: *Stir up our hearts, O Lord* - stir up our hearts to repentance, O Lord, *that we may serve you with pure minds*, forgiven minds, spotless minds, now and when you come again in glory. That John's joy be our joy. Gift given. Gift received.

And isn't that what Christmas is all about, after all? Gift given. Gift received. And on this Second Sunday of Advent, John has a gift for you. And so does your Lord. Come now and receive His gift to you - His forgiveness and life, now, here, in His Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. That you live in Him and He in you. That you be ready when He comes.

And maybe God will then use you to comfort someone. To be like John and share the joy you know with someone caught in sin and trouble. To speak that word of forgiveness no one else will; that word of peace so elusive; that word that points them not to themselves for the answer, but to the One who came, who is coming now, and has promised to come again. The One who comforts and saves. You don't have to go out and knock on doors to do that - God will bring them to you, as He brought them to John. Wherever you are, it doesn't matter. And a word of peace, a word of hope, a word of forgiveness - to a friend, a family member, a neighbor - just might make all the difference in the world.

Because the wilderness . . . that's a place we all know. The good news of Advent is that Jesus came into our wilderness of sin to comfort us with His forgiveness in it, to save us from it, and to provide for us a home after it. A home with Him, back in Paradise, forever. And so we pray the Advent prayer: *Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly.*

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.