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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Teacher of Joy”

Text: Luke 7:18-28; Philippians 4:4-7

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

The best teachers don't give you a straight answer - they tell you where to find the answer. That can be extremely frustrating for the lazy student, who wants only to be spoon fed. But sooner or later, as in life, the student must grow up. We start with milk, then on to being spoon fed; after that comes eating on your own - which is messy at first, food everywhere (right parents?), until spoon and fork are mastered - and then finally the meat and potatoes. And hopefully just as satisfying as that last course is for our dining pleasure, so too the student will find the joy of learning.

And so it is with John the Baptist . . . though there is some difference of opinion about these verses we heard today. Some think that when John sends his disciples to Jesus with the question: *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?* he was asking for himself. That he is racked with doubt since he has been languishing in prison for some time now. His preaching and baptizing had started out with such success and promise, but now . . . ? This is not how it was supposed to work, Jesus. So maybe he was mistaken.

It certainly is an understandable opinion. For many or most or all of us have wondered or doubted for far less. We too who have lives filled with troubles. Things aren't working out as we had hoped or planned. Worries. Fears. For ourselves or for our loved ones. Old age making things difficult. Temptations abounding and capturing more and more hearts. When we look at life, we too can wonder: Really, Jesus? Is this the way, Jesus? This is not how it was supposed to work, is it Jesus?

But on the other hand, this is the John who leapt for joy in his mother's womb at hearing the voice of Mary, the mother of the Lord. The John who baptized Jesus and witnessed the amazing aftermath of the Spirit descending like a dove upon Him, and the voice of the Father from heaven. This is the John who pointed to Jesus and declared: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). This is the John who said of Jesus: *He must increase; I must decrease* (John 3:30). And certainly, being in prison would qualify as decreasing.

So I think, rather, John is acting as a master teacher here. John's whole life and career were about one thing: **Jesus**. Preparing the way for Him. And now that He has come, John is fading out of the picture. The prophet is giving way to the fulfillment, the shadow to the reality.

But apparently some of his disciples are still hanging around. Good fellows. But they should not be here any longer. They need to be with Jesus. So John sends his students to see for themselves. To see the answer. To see Jesus in the flesh. To answer for themselves: ***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?***

Jesus is a master teacher, too. The master teacher. And so He preaches, words that give faith; but at the same time, He points, too, to the answer. *You tell me, good fellows. What do you see?* And then He lists the signs, in ascending order, from the least important to the most important. ***The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.*** Impressive. But there's more. ***The dead are raised up!*** And then this most importantly of all: ***the poor have good news preached to them.*** To the poor in spirit are preached the riches of God, to give forgiveness for sin, hope for despair, light for darkness, strength for weakness, and life for death. And all this, not just powerful stuff, goodies given out; but fulfillment of prophecy. The Word of God fulfilled, for faith. Yes, Jesus is the one. When you look at yourself and look at your life, questions, doubts, fears, death. Look at Jesus, life, confidence, and joy.

And that's what we need, isn't it? Did John question and doubt? Or was it his disciples? We may not know that answer, but we know this: **we do**. And what is it for you? What prison? What sin wrapping its tentacles around you? What troubles and worries dragging you down like an anchor? What lies satanically hissed into your ears making you think you're not worth anything? That you're too sinful, too disappointing; you'll never measure up. What darkness descending, encircling, trying to erect its walls around you? We look at life and we wonder, too. ***Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*** 'Cause me, and my kids, and my friends . . . things don't look so good, Jesus. We really, really need a Saviour.

But if Jesus isn't doing what you think He should be doing, or how you think He should be doing it, is the problem Him . . . or you? ***And blessed is the one who is not offended by me,*** Jesus said. When we are offended, when we are disappointed, when we go looking for other saviours, other people or things in this world that we think will give us what we think we want or need, that is not the way of blessing. That is to veer off the way. Temporary happiness does not give lasting joy. Blessing comes only through the blessed One, and maybe in ways that will surprise you.

For your ultimate blessing comes not through life, or a life fulfilled, or a life that goes according to your plans and desires, **but through death**. The death of Jesus and your death with Him. Jesus' death for you on the cross, atoning for your sin and the sin of the

world. And your death with Him in Baptism, where that old, sinful, doubting, worldly, other-saviour-seeking man is drowned, and a new man given life. Satan hates that new man, you know. And will rage against him; against you. Causing you no little pain, no little opposition. Does that mean your Saviour isn't real? That it didn't work? That He didn't really win? Quite the contrary - that's why Satan is fighting so hard. Jesus did win. To bless you and mercy you and snatch you away from the evil one, so precious you are to Him. So valuable. That He traded His life for yours.

And as great as John was - and as Jesus said, ***among those born of women none is greater than John*** - which means not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; not Moses or Joshua; not David or Solomon; not Elijah or even Mary - none greater than John. Yet as great as John was, ***the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he***. That's you. A least, a child. But a child *of God*. Low, despised, nothing, least in the eyes of the world, but great in your heavenly Father's eyes. And so blessed with His promises: His forgiveness, His life, His kingdom. All of which are out of Satan's reach, for they are hidden with Christ in God. So even if Satan take everything else away - health, freedom, riches, even life itself - He cannot have those, those gifts of Christ; and He cannot have you.

That taking away would soon happen to John, as not many days from this account that we heard, King Herod would have his head on a platter. No matter. John went from grace to grace, from great to greater, from this world of sin to that world where sin is forever banished, and there is only joy.

That is not our reality now, or course. We're still in this world of sin and death, of darkness and disappointment, of worry and fear. And yet there is joy for us, too. The joy not from getting exactly what we want for Christmas, or exactly what we want from life, but joy born from the Word of God - both the Word fulfilled, and the promises we know will be. As sure as Jesus is risen from the dead, so does He live to fulfill every promise. Maybe not as we expect, or even want, or understand. But the cross shows us that with Jesus, the greatest blessing can come from what looks like the greatest defeat.

And that's why Paul could proclaim - even while in prison like John - ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice***. He repeats it for emphasis. And that's why we lit the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath today - the joy candle. Because in the midst of a dark world, we have a joyful and certain hope. We have Jesus. And He is not only the one who was to come, but the one who is still coming to us, to bless.

And don't be offended by how He comes still today - through preaching, through water, through bread and wine. It's just as easy to be offended by these as to be offended by the flesh of the man from Nazareth who claimed He was God, or the so-called prophet getting His just desserts on the cross, from which He couldn't even save Himself. . . . Couldn't? Or wouldn't?

But that Good Friday body and blood are really here in this bread and wine, for you. To bless. That Word of that man from Nazareth is still preached into your ears, to bless. That water He was baptized in you are baptized in, for life. And this is good. For it is not the spectacular that we have to go out and find and discover and get Jesus for ourselves. No. He comes to us and finds us. ***The Lord is at hand.*** In our prisons, in our darkness, in our lostness and sin, through these humble means. Lowly means for lowly ones, to make great.

And so we light a rose-colored candle and curse the darkness. We sing our hymns that confess our Saviour, that satan flee with his ears covered and saying lalalalalalala! We pray boldly, as dear children ask their dear Father. And we come with open mouths and empty hearts, that Christ fill them with Himself, His very body and blood. And in all these ways, the good news is preached and given to us. *That unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11). *That He is not here, He is risen as He said* (Matt 28:6)! *And that He is coming back for you, to take you to His home and yours* (John 14:3). Good news, indeed, of great joy.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.