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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
December 13, 2020
3rd Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Hymns: 73:1,3,4; 63; 106:1,2,4,7; 97:1,4

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: John 1:6-8, 19-29

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸ He was not that Light, but *was sent* to bear witness of that Light. ... ¹⁹ Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

²² Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

²³ He said: "I *am*

'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Make straight the way of the Lord," '

as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴ Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵ And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷ It is He who,

coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”

²⁸ These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our coming Lord, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Advent purpose.

Let’s take a moment to review the purpose of this season of the church year called Advent. I know the world jumps past advent to Christmas and then when Christmas arrives the world shuts Christmas down instead of observing the traditional twelve days of Christmas. This fits the world’s business model. But we have a different perspective. Advent is a time of preparation and direction. Our Advent purpose is to focus on things spiritual so that we are better prepared to observe the Lord’s coming. We can put a double meaning on the world observe, for when it comes to our Christmas observance it is a proper celebration of Jesus’ birth and remembering how wondrous a miracle of grace it was that the Son of God was born of the Virgin Mary. To this end we seek the Lord’s advent into our hearts to enrich our faith.

However, we are also thinking of being better prepared to observe, (as in watch for and see) the Lord’s coming in glory. We need to be reminded that this is as real and certain an event as Jesus’ birth, but one we anticipate, one not yet come to pass.

Our concern begins with our personal preparation, but it extends beyond us to those we love, our families, our neighbors and friends. Then our function in Advent becomes more like that of John the Baptist that we are looking for an opportunity to point others to Jesus, to remind them of the grace that He brings. So

then, on the basis of our text this morning which presents to us aspects of the ministry of John the Baptist, let us seek the Holy Spirit's blessing that we may --

THEME: Follow John's Pattern of Testimony.

We begin by considering John's manner of --

I. Bearing Witness of the Light.

Our text reports of John:

John 1:6-8 "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. ⁸He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

We know from Scripture prophecy, from the message of the angel to Zachariah, John's father, and from Jesus own words concerning John that John was indeed a prophet of God who was sent to fulfill a specific and important role. John was sent to bear witness of the Light that was sent into the world. John fulfilled his ministry with zeal and devotion. John did not shrink back. He would not be intimidated by kings, or Jewish councils. When meditating on the Scriptures about John the Baptist we usually consider John's call for repentance, and how specific he was in directing people away from the sins in their lives. John was directing people away from the darkness of this world toward the light of Christ.

Obviously, we are not called to be prophets of God like John the Baptist. However, we have been called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. The darkness of this world is not only evident in the fact that there is so much sin in the world. It is also evident in the world's response to sin and guilt. This is where the darkness gets to be deep darkness that enshrouds people. The ideas about karma and nirvana, and reincarnation, and good works, and the inner divine to be found within each person are very popular in the world. Far more people place their hope in these false ideas than in Christ crucified. All these ideas fall under the umbrella of work righteousness; that people are able to push back against sin and death by their own efforts and find enlightenment through peaceful meditation. **That is darkness.** One can add to that the world's

philosophy of “Don’t worry, Be happy!” and that one should do whatever it takes, do whatever one must do to be true to oneself. The justification for this that has been presented to me more than once is, “I know God wants me to be happy! This is what makes me happy!” “Darkness *has covered* the earth and deep darkness the people.” (Isaiah 60:2)

So it’s advent. The Lord is coming. Christmas is 12 days away. The world is focused on being merry and bright! They seek this merry and bright by calling for hope and happiness, and romance. And yet every year we read reports of great unhappiness and depression in the holiday season. That may be even more true this year as many people feel even more isolated because of the Covid pandemic. The world doesn’t have the answer, the light they point to is actually just more darkness, a black hole that sucks people in.

Again I say, I know we aren’t called to be John the Baptist, but we can follow his pattern of witnessing to the Light. John “*came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe.*” (v.7) We can share our focus on Jesus as the Light of this world. We can start with sharing Scripturally sound Christmas cards, and Christmas greetings. We can find opportunity to reach out to others with acts of kindness that can be coupled with why we give gifts at Christmas. We can remind people of the greater gift God gave us in Jesus’ birth. This can happen, and maybe more this year because of Covid, that people may be receptive to a witness of the Light.

While my daughter and I were putting up some of our Christmas lights a woman passing by commented on our “JOY” sign, saying it was pretty, and maybe next year we will have more joy again. It was easy to comment that our greatest joy is found in Jesus, and no pandemic can take that joy away, or even diminish it. Our Christmas lights aren’t just pretty, they are to serve as reminders that at Christmas the Light of the world was born in Bethlehem!

We are called by God to bear witness of the Light. We are not that Light, but we are here, where we live on this earth, to tell others of that Light that is Christ. We bear witness of the Light that others might believe!

We learn from John's pattern of testimony how to --

II. Keep the Focus on Jesus.

Our text reports how the Pharisees sent a delegation out to question John. They came out to ascertain who John claimed to be. People by the thousands were streaming out into the wilderness to hear John's message of repentance and be baptized by John. Their focus was on John. John made no claims of greatness about himself. He stated clearly that he was not the Christ, or one of the prophets risen from the dead. When pressed John simply pointed to the prophecy from Isaiah regarding the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. (John 1:23, Isaiah 40:3) This answer shifted the focus away from John and onto Jesus. By doing this John's testimony stated, "It's not about me!"

That is an important lesson for us, for it teaches us two contrasting lessons. How did John stay so bold in his testimony? By remembering that it was not about John. It was about leading people to the light of Christ. It was about the gospel of Christ. When this delegation from Jerusalem questioned John, his pattern of testimony turned the conversation away from John and back to Jesus.

With our own testimony, we should remember that it is not about me. When I get self-conscious and timid in my testimony then in my own mind it has become about me. and the world will feed on that, even at times trying to intimidate the Christian with the challenge, "*Who do you think you are suggesting certain behaviors are sinful, or saying that Jesus is the only way to heaven? Do you think you have a monopoly on truth? Another person's truth may be just as legitimate as your truth!*" In that way the world will attempt to make your testimony about you, what you *think*, not what you know and believe from Scripture, and certainly not about Jesus. Remember John's pattern that led to the conclusion, "It is not about me". It's not about me, it is about the coming Lord!

John 1:26-27 John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷ It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."

John was causing quite a stir. Many people talked about going out to hear John, and to be baptized by him over on the east side of the Jordan River. John acknowledged that he was baptizing people but that wasn't the big thing that should be noted about John's testimony. He directed attention back to Jesus and Jesus' superior glory. John was quick to point out that Jesus was so far superior to John that John wasn't worthy to perform the lowliest of tasks for Jesus of loosening and removing Jesus' sandals.

So it remains important for us to not only grasp for ourselves the magnitude of the glory of the gospel of Christ, but that we are able to communicate to others the wonder of Jesus' grace, the magnitude of His love and His devotion to securing our salvation. That is what Christmas is all about, and not only Christmas but Jesus' entire life, death, and resurrection. Ultimately the superior glory of Jesus will become visible for all the world to see when He comes again in His second advent on the last day.

We understand that Jesus is vastly more glorious than we are, yet it is easy for others to lose sight of that. Even as it would have been easy for John the Baptist to get caught up in the big crowds coming to hear him, and think something more of himself than he ought to think, so preachers today can allow their own egos to get the better of them. **Jesus is Lord. Jesus is our Redeemer God!** Jesus humbled Himself and died for us, and now sits at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is all glorious in heaven above. I am not worthy to untie His shoes. And so it is true for us all. We learn from the pattern of John the Baptist to magnify the glory of the Lord and humble ourselves before Him.

Finally, John teaches us to point others to Jesus with a simple straightforward gospel testimony. "*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'*" (John 1:29) John's testimony was pure and simple gospel. He made it clear, this is the One. This is the Lamb of God. Everybody in his audience at that moment understood what John was saying. They were very familiar with sacrificial lambs from their Passover observances as well as other prescribed sacrifices. They knew and understood that these sacrifices were symbolic of a greater sacrifice. Jesus was the sacrifice that God Himself prepared for the sins of the world.

The removal of sin is an important concept stated so simply by John. We too can convey that wondrous truth in the simplest of terms, Jesus takes our sins away. Jesus takes our sins AWAY! They are no longer stuck to us or associated with us in any way. Jesus took them away. No more stain of sin, no guilt of sin, no more condemnation or curse of sin! Jesus takes our sins away! There is nothing complicated about this gospel; it is just magnificent in its wonder of grace stated in the simplest of terms. Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” of the entire world, your sin, my sin, everyone’s sin.

So this Advent and Christmas season let’s not only think about our personal advent preparation, but let us also seek to follow John’s Pattern of Testimony. Let’s seize opportunities to bear witness of the Light that shines in a sin darkened world, and then seek the Spirit’s wisdom to keep the focus on Jesus and His superior glory as that Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.