

CELEBRATE ADVENT WITH JOHN THE BAPTIST

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Old Testament Lesson; Deuteronomy 18:15-19

Epistle Lesson; Philippians 4:4-7

Sermon Text; John 1:19-28

Do you remember who John the Baptist's father was? If you answered Zechariah, you are correct. Remember, Zechariah was a priest. The Bible tells us Zechariah was a priest from the division of Abijah. It was while Zechariah was on duty as a priest in Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, even in their old age.

I want you to hear, again, what it was that the angel of the Lord said to Zechariah, explaining to him the significance of the son who would be born to him and Elizabeth. Here is what the angel of the Lord said. “He will be a joy and a delight to you. Many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink (that means he would be a Nazarite. You may recall some others in the Old Testament who had taken that Nazarite vow. Samson and Samuel are two examples.) He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord, their God. He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The angel shared with Zechariah the significance of his son, John. Remember, Zechariah was a priest. And so, by descent, that would make John also a priest. But today in our text, we don't find John being a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is on the west side of the Jordan River and John was doing his work on the east side of the river. And so, it should not surprise us when Jews from Jerusalem come out to John in the wilderness to ask, *“What are you doing? You are a priest. You are from the division of Abijah. What are you doing out here in the wilderness?”*

That should not surprise us, first of all, because of a passage in the New Testament, which would come, certainly, later. But that passage says,

“Test the spirits.”

Those spiritual leaders from Jerusalem came out to John to find out who he was and to find out the message that he preached.

Dear Christian friends, that is what you are to do every time you hear a message from God's Word, whether it is a sermon I give, or Pastor Bartels gives, or a sermon that anyone gives. You should be able to go back into your Bible and say for yourself, *“Is what was being preached from God's Word, or not?”*

I was visiting with a member this last week, who said, her dad, every Sunday, when he came home from church, would get out his Bible and look through the scripture readings to make sure, for himself, what was being taught was in keeping with what God's Word said. There is also a passage in the Old Testament. It happens to come just a few verses after our Old Testament Lesson for today, in which the people asked themselves, *“How do we know what the prophets say is saying something from God's Word?”* Remember, in those days it was the spoken Word, not the written Word. So, people wondered, *“How do we know if what the prophet is saying is from God, or not?”* God told Moses to tell the people if what the prophet says comes true, it is from the Lord. If it does not come true, it is

not from the Lord.

So, we should not be surprised as this delegation of Jews from Jerusalem come out to Elijah and ask him, first of all, who he is. We hear from our text for today John the Baptist saying he is not the Christ. He confessed freely, “I am not the Christ.”

And so, those Levites, those priests, pressed John a little bit more. They asked, “*If you are not the Christ, then are you Elijah?*” Two weeks ago, I focused a little more clearly on this passage from the book of Malachi, chapter four. The people were expecting Elijah to come before Jesus did. John the Baptist is a fulfillment of that passage. He came in the spirit of Elijah, as the angel of the Lord had told his dad, Zechariah in the temple.

“*So, if you are not the Christ. You are not Elijah, are you the Prophet?*” Today, in our Old Testament Lesson, we see the passage that they were referring to. It is verse 15, from Deuteronomy, chapter 18. “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me, (the me refers to Moses) from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”

And so, they asked John, “*Are you this prophet that was prophesied in the Old Testament who was to come?*”

John answered, “No.”

He is not the Christ. He is not Elijah. He is not the Prophet. So that delegation asks, “Who are you?”

Notice what John the Baptist said,

“I am the voice...”

That is a pretty good nickname we could use for John. He is the voice. What did he (the voice) come to do? He came to prepare the way for the Lord.

Now, John in his day did not have divided interstate highways, like we do today. Today, we can just get on the interstate and zip to a city, pretty quickly. In John's day, they just had paths that they would walk on. Oftentimes rocks, debris, or fallen trees would cross

over those paths. If ever a king were to go out traveling, a delegation would go in front of that king, to clear those rocks, debris, and those fallen trees to prepare for the coming of the king. We might say the same thing happened here in Madison, about a month ago, when President Obama came to town. He landed at the airport and the way from the airport to the school where he spoke at was prepared. The entrance ramps and the exit ramps were all blocked off to make for safe travel for our president.

'The voice' was preparing for the coming of a King. Jesus was coming. Christ, our King was coming. John the Baptist was preparing for Jesus' coming.

Now, John wasn't literally clearing the paths of rocks, debris, and fallen trees. But, what John the Baptist was doing was he was preparing the way, or the 'highway' into the hearts of the people. Dear fellow redeemed, how is it that our hearts are prepared for Jesus' coming? The answer is we are prepared, as we confess that we are sinners. One of the questions that I frequently ask my catechism students is this question: "When was it that we became sinners?"

Sometimes, in a quick answer, a student will say, "Well, we became sinners at birth."

I will say, "Think about that answer, just a moment."

They will correct themselves and say, "Well, that is right. We became sinners, when we were conceived."

Sometimes we downplay our sin. We knowingly and willingly keep on sinning, expecting to be forgiven. But, that is not really preparing the way for Jesus' coming into our hearts. Rather, we prepare for Jesus' coming into our hearts by, yes, recognizing that we are sinners and then wanting to change from our sinful behavior, and wanting to live a life that is pleasing to God and His Word.

Today, as John the Baptist was asked, "Who are you?" he quickly takes the focus off of himself by saying, "*I am not the Christ. I am*

not Elijah. I am not the Prophet. But, rather I am the voice.” And then, he shifts the focus to Jesus. He points to Jesus and who Jesus is. It is the verse right after our text for today in which John points to Jesus and says,

**“Behold the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world.”**

John did not want to have the focus on himself, but he wanted the focus on Christ. Well, apparently the Levites and the priests were satisfied with the answers that had been given to them. But, the Pharisees were not. They were also a part of that delegation. And so, they asked more questions of John. Not who he is, but what his work would be. They asked, *“Why do you baptize? You are not the Christ. You are not Elijah. You are not the prophet. Why do you baptize?”*

Notice, again, what John the Baptist does. He quickly answers, but then he takes the focus off of himself. He wants to point to the work of Christ. He says, *“I baptize with water, but there is One who is coming, who is greater than I am. He is even standing in our midst, right now.”* You see, by this point John the Baptist had already baptized Jesus, and Jesus had already begun His public ministry. He was standing among the people, already at that time. But, notice what John says about himself. He says, *“I am not even worthy to untie the thong of the sandal of the One who stands among us.”*

That was a job of a slave. The slave was to take off the master's sandals, to wash the master's feet, and to prepare those sandals for the next journey. John is saying he is not even worthy to be called a slave of Christ, to be able to untie that thong of Jesus' sandal.

John quickly took the focus off of himself and wanted the focus to be on Christ and on His work. Again, John said,

**“Behold the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world.”**

That is the work of Jesus, our Savior. It is the message of the angels

that was spoken to the shepherds and also the message that is spoken to us. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord. The work of the Savior is to save us from our sin and to give us eternal life in Heaven.

Today, as we end the Advent Season, where is your focus? Is the focus on yourself? Is it on the presents? Is it on the food? Is it on your traveling? I hope it is not, but if it is, let's shift the focus. Let's celebrate Advent, with John the Baptist. He did not focus on himself or on his work, but he focused on Jesus and His work. He freely confessed who Jesus was. He freely pointed to the work of Jesus, as the One who took away the sin of the world.

This last Thursday evening, the Day School children, here at Holy Cross had their Christmas service. One of the songs that the children sang, (the first through fourth graders) was one in which it had this refrain:

*Run to the manger.
Come see the little King.
Run to the manger,
where Jesus is born.*

That is proper preparation for Jesus coming into our hearts, one that has been prepared, in which we recognize our sin. We desire, with the help of the Lord, to amend our sinful lives and to have Christ come, on that 'highway', into our hearts by faith, to forgive us of our sin, and to grant unto us everlasting life, with Him in Heaven.

Amen