

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

The season of Advent marks the beginning of a new church year, but as Rev. Lammert mentioned last Sunday, that Gospel seemed a little incongruous. Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey comes toward the end of His ministry on earth, not the beginning. That text should come, we think, as we prepare for Easter (and it does), but not for Christmas. What was it doing as the Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent? Rev. Lammert answered that question well last Sunday.

The season of Advent is the beginning of a new church year, and so you may have started to get excited as our Gospel text itself began with a beginning: the *"beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Yet what is this beginning? It doesn't begin in eternity as with the Gospel according to St. John or with Jesus' Divine conception as in Matthew and Luke or with the magnificent account of Jesus' lowly birth of a virgin, greeted with angelic proclamation and singing, visited by shepherds as in Luke.

No, this beginning is the preaching of John the Baptist, for this is the Evangelist Mark's concern, not just the Gospel of Jesus, that is, the things Jesus said and did, not the Gospel as a body of knowledge, but the preaching of the good news about Jesus Christ. Mark does not deny Jesus' Divine origin. He calls Him *"the Son of God."* In fact, Mark records others calling Jesus *"the Son of God"* (Mark 3:11; Mark 15:39). Mark does not deny Jesus' kingly lineage from David through Joseph. He calls Him the *"Christ."* You heard it last Sunday: *"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David"* (Mark 11:10)!

It's just that these things are not Mark's emphasis. Mark is emphasizing the *"preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,"* and that begins with John the Baptist.

So what are John the Baptist's credentials? Well, he is the Lord's *"messenger"* sent *"before [the] face"* of Him whom the Lord had promised, sent to *"prepare [His] way."* John is *"the voice of one crying in the wilderness,"* again, sent to *"[p]repare the way of the Lord,"* sent to *"make his paths straight."*

Indeed, this was John's purpose told to his father Zechariah before he was even conceived. John was going to *"go before [the Lord]"* to *"make ready for the Lord a people prepared"* (Luke 1:17). And when John was born, Zechariah, *"filled with the Holy Spirit"* (Luke 1:67), proclaimed that very visitation of the Lord, and John as the one who *"will go before the Lord to prepare his ways"* (Luke 1:76).

Of course, John's eccentricities could put you off, but these, too, were foretold by the angel. John, come *"in the spirit and power of Elijah"* (Luke 1:17), was

arrayed like Elijah. His camel's hair clothing and leather belt was how Elijah's appearance is described in the Old Testament (2 Kings 1:8). Moreover, his refraining from "*wine or strong drink*" (Luke 1:15) and his diet of locusts and wild honey is exactly what one might expect of a wilderness preacher, "*crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'*"

These are John's *bona fides*, and with them established, how then did he prepare the way for the Lord? First, by "*baptizing ... and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" Baptism is central to the Christian faith, and it's the ordinary way to be brought into the Church, to be united with Christ Himself. To be sure, John says that the baptism that Jesus institutes and performs through His disciples gives something more than John's, for the Spirit comes in Jesus' baptism; nevertheless, John's baptism was not without power itself, for it was a baptism leading to repentance, and repentance is to be followed by the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance and forgiveness are always preparatory to the coming of the Lord. That's why our Divine Service has a preparatory rite that precedes the Divine Service proper. As we begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we're reminded of our own baptisms. Whether you remember the act of being baptized or not is not important. Baptism is not a work you do, but is a Divine act of washing away your sins and giving you rebirth into the kingdom of God. It's a Divine act. God is at work, and God's works are more sure than anything you can do.

Already here, in John's preaching of the good news, we come to understand this most important teaching: that forgiveness is a gift, and salvation with it. As foretold by his father, John gives us "*knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of [our] sins*" (Luke 1:77). Of course, we Lutherans say it more often using St. Paul's language: "*by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9).

This preaching is good news — the tender comfort that assures us that our "*iniquity is pardoned*"; this preaching assures us that our "*warfare is ended,*" that constant struggle within oneself to do enough, to try hard enough, to earn God's favor. But God's favor is never earned; it is only given. That's why John's preaching is the good news that guides "*our feet into the way of peace*" (Luke 1:79).

But second, John prepares the way of the Lord by pointing people away from himself and to the one who comes after him, to the one who is mightier than John. "Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is" (LSB656), for remember, John the Baptist was preaching the good news about Jesus Christ, and Mark takes us immediately from this preaching by John to Jesus' baptism. Mark doesn't place the words in John's

mouth, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29), as the Evangelist John does. Mark doesn't have John the Baptist be as explicit as the Evangelist John is, who records the Baptist saying, "*This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me'*" (John 1:30). But Mark's Gospel leaves no doubt who this mightier one is; it's Jesus, and by John's own words, He will increase; John will decrease (John 3:30).

Neither is the cross explicitly in view in these texts, for although John understood that Jesus would be the sacrificial lamb "*without blemish or spot*" who would by His "*precious blood*" pay the ransom price for our sins (1 Pet. 1:18-19), John did not get to witness Jesus' crucifixion. John knew that Jesus' baptism would deliver the Holy Spirit, but didn't know that by this baptism we would be "*baptized into Christ's death,*" "*buried ... with him,*" and raised with Christ to "*walk in newness of life*" (Rom. 6:3-4).

But we know, for we have not only the beginning of the preaching of the good news; we have the continuation of this preaching, for we know the Lamb of God was slaughtered for us wandering sheep. We know God laid our iniquities upon Him; we know "*he [bore] our grief and carried our sorrows,*" that He was "*smitten by God, and afflicted ... pierced for our transgressions ... crushed for our iniquities*"; we know that He took the punishment that is ours, that His wounds bring us healing (Isa. 53:4-6).

John the Baptist began his preaching of the good news about Jesus with a call to repentance, and those who preach the good news today still call for repentance. Our need is just as great, for sin has not decreased, and temptation is all around us. We confess every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: "we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 5th Petition). And we trust that by the blood of Jesus we are forgiven. We trust that by our baptism our sins were washed away — and we remember that washing daily by contrition and repentance, drowning the Old Adam in us. We trust that by partaking of the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood "given and shed for [us] for the forgiveness of sins," we have what Christ's words promise.

Yes, John's preaching was the beginning of the proclamation of the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. His message continues, and more, for we have even more good news to proclaim in Jesus — and yet, it's the same message — the same forgiveness, life, and salvation. John's the beginning; ours the continuation, as we wait for the end.

Dear saints, by the preaching of the good news still today, we remain a people prepared, not for Christ's first coming, but for His second, so that on that great day of the Lord, we will be "*found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*" We

remain a people prepared as we hear Christ preached and we believe. We are baptized; we are forgiven; we are strengthened by Christ's body and blood. Lord, strengthen us by this good news to the end.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.