

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Today we hear the preaching of John the Baptist. In fact, we're going to hear a lot from John this Advent as our midweek services focus on his preparatory preaching.

Last Wednesday's text may not have seemed out of place. The angel's announcement heralding to Zechariah the birth of John is chronologically satisfying — that announcement precedes Gabriel's annunciation to Jesus' mother of her great privilege and blessing — that her son would be "*Son of the Most High,*" a king on "*the throne of his father David,*" reigning in an everlasting kingdom (Luke 1:32-33).

But Luke sets the historical table for us today: Tiberius is Caesar, not Augustus; Herod the Great's sons Herod and Philip rule their part of their father's kingdom, which had been divided into four parts, not their dastardly father who slaughtered the boys in Bethlehem. Luke tells us, though, that these sons had their own evil ways — to the demise of John the Baptist. Our Gospel has John the Baptist out in the wilderness preaching a "*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" ... as he is getting ready to baptize Jesus.

Jesus is not at this time still in His mother's womb waiting for Caesar Augustus to order the great census that would take Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. You recall, of course, that John the Baptist was conceived before Jesus was — six months before. And you remember also that with a jump and a kick John did proclaim Jesus as the Savior to his mother Elizabeth. But, at that time, John was prevented from going "*before the Lord to prepare his ways,*" and from giving "*knowledge of salvation to ... people in the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:77). He was still in his mother's womb.

But, this Sunday has John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, preaching to prepare the people not for the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem, but for His coming as One who would "*give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*" and who would "*guide our feet into the way of peace*" (Luke 1:78-79). John's preaching was "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness,*" as Isaiah foretold, preparing "*the way of the Lord*" and making "*his paths straight.*" And as the Lord spoke through the prophet Malachi, John was the Lord's messenger, sent to "*prepare the way before*" the One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would come down and anoint to preach good news and proclaim liberty and give sight and bring the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19).

Thus the season of Advent — and especially this Sunday in Advent as today's Gospel text bears witness — is not just about the coming of the Bethlehem babe.

You recall that last Sunday's texts had Jesus coming to Jerusalem to suffer and die — the very purpose of His coming in our flesh. Therefore, the prophecy of John's father Zechariah would have to wait until John was an adult for it to come to pass, for it was not in Jesus' descent from the Father that "*all flesh would see the salvation of God,*" but in His being lifted up.

To be sure, some would see their salvation in the infant Jesus. Mary would see it. "*See, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,*" (Luke 1:31), and Joseph, too, "*you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matt. 1:21). Mary would respond, "*my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (Luke 1:47). The shepherds would see it. "*Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.*" "*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*" (Luke 2:15, 20). Faithful Simeon would see it—the Holy Spirit told him that he would see "*the Lord's Christ*" (Luke 2:26). And when he did, he sang, "*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples*" (Luke 2:29-31).

But for most of us, we see our salvation in the Christ who was lifted up — that the whole world might look to Him, be drawn to Him, believe in Him, and be saved. As Jesus taught: "*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*" (John 3:14-15). Again, Jesus taught, "*I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*" (John 12:32). Again, Jesus said, this is the will of the Father: "*that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*" (John 6:40).

This is the Christ that John the Baptist points us to by his preaching — not the cuddly babe in the manger, but the One who gives up His life as sacrifice for the sins of the world. "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29)!

Not that they are two Christ's. The difference is not with Jesus—He is the same Christ, in the manger or on the cross. He was always the One who came to scatter "*the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*" He was always the One who came to bring "*down the mighty from their thrones.*" He was always the One who came to send the rich "*away empty*" — but on the other hand to fill "*the hungry with good things,*" and to exalt "*those of humble estate*" (Luke 1:51-53). He was always the One who came to "*proclaim liberty*" and "*recovering of sight*" and "*the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18-19). Christ is the One whose way was prepared by

the preaching of repentance, who Himself preached repentance, and who commanded His church to preach repentance with the forgiveness of sins.

And, as John preaches, Jesus is also the Christ who now sits on His throne and who will come again to judge the living and the dead. John preaches, *“His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”* On that day all preaching of repentance will stop. On that day every eye will behold Him coming again in glory in the clouds. On that day, the faithful will rejoice, while those who have not heeded John’s and Jesus’ and the church’s call for repentance and faith will wail and gnash their teeth.

Therefore, John the Baptist prepares us today for Jesus’ return by his preaching, pointing us while living especially to the Christ sacrificed for our sin, that we might repent, believe, and be saved. John points us to the One who *“will tend his flock like a shepherd”* (Isaiah 40:11) —laying down His life for His sheep, gathering His lambs in His arms, carrying them in His bosom, not letting one be snatched from His loving hands.

But don’t be misled: there is one Christ, who came as an infant king and who came to serve and give His life as a ransom for sin. There is one Christ, who came humbly in our flesh and came to humble the proud, calling the people to repentance; there is one Christ who was baptized by John and who came to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, calling us to faith, giving us forgiveness of sin; one and the same Christ came enlightening our sin-darkened lives by the lamp of His word. The difference is not in the cuddly Christ versus the bloodied Christ. They’re the same. The difference is in our attitude toward them.

For who diverts his eyes from a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths? Sweet and innocent? Helpless? But from the cross . . . Who thinks in terms of repentance when approaching the manger to catch a glimpse of the newborn Jesus? Who thinks of his sin as we sing our comforting lullabies? How many want to have Jesus in the manger, but take Him off the cross? But we need to remember, already there in the manger, Jesus has taken on your sins. Already there, He is your substitute. The babe in the manger is the same Christ who was nailed to the tree for you.

So listen to John the Baptist prepare you for the Lord. Repent of all attempts to obscure the cross in this holy season. As we approach the season of the incarnation of our Lord, prepare your hearts and eyes to see Jesus for who He is — the salvation of God, the Savior of the world, the lamb slaughtered for your sins. Having thus prepared, come and receive the Body and Blood of the one Christ: Christ incarnate, crucified, living for you.

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