

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Last Sunday Pastor Litke talked briefly about a “threefold coming” of Christ that’s the focus of Advent, and one of those “comings” is the coming of Jesus, the Son of God “being born as the human Child of a humble virgin named Mary in a humble village called Bethlehem” (Litke sermon at Zion, 20221127).

Closely connected to the story of Jesus’ coming is the coming of the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist. John is an important person in the story of Jesus. Not just Jesus’ but John’s coming was foretold. Matthew reports that John fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy. He comes as “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’*” Luke reports that John fulfills Malachi’s prophecy. He is the Elijah foretold; though John disclaims it (John 1:21), Jesus identifies him as that Elijah (Matt. 11:14). And the angel Gabriel announces it to John’s father Zechariah: he comes “*in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared*” (Luke 1:17).

We think on John the Baptist as we’re thinking about that coming of Jesus as the infant child of Mary, sweet and mild, and so some confusion about John’s role is understandable. But as our Gospel today bears witness, it is not Jesus’ birth that John proclaims, for John comes not as a heavenly messenger to shepherds. He comes as “*the prophet of the Most High*” going “*before the Lord to prepare his ways,*” giving “*knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins,*” and telling of “*the sunrise [that] shall visit us,*” God’s “*tender mercy*” toward us sinners (Luke 1:76-78). And so, John does not appear to the shepherds in the field nor does he join the ox and ass in the Bethlehem stable.

John appears as Jesus begins His ministry. He prepares the people for Jesus’ ministry, and this is his preparation: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” At least, that’s the beginning. That’s how one begins to follow the Christ; that’s how Christ begins to reign among us; that’s how Christ becomes our King: through repentance and then being baptized. That’s what Peter tells the Pentecost Day crowd that’s cut to the heart by his preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead: “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38).

That’s the way it happens for us, too. We are brought to the font, a little child — or humbly as a little child. We repent: “Do you renounce the devil?” “I do renounce him!” “Do you renounce all his works?” “I do renounce them!” “Do you renounce all his ways?” “I do renounce them!” We repent also confessing the faith into which we are being baptized: “Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?” “Yes” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son?” “Yes” “Do you

believe in the Holy Spirit?” “Yes” And then we trust in God that the baptismal candidate will be “be sundered from the number of the unbelieving, preserved dry and secure in the holy ark of Christendom” (Zion baptismal rite). That is, we trust that God the Holy Spirit will work faith in this sinner’s heart and he or she will receive what baptism offers: forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, eternal life (Small Catechism, Baptism, Second).

Of course, people disbelieve God’s promises in baptism and deride it. By outward appearances, the water looks just like plain water — and for us, it does come out of the tap. Skeptics wag their tongues and ask “How can water do such great things?” We Lutherans know the answer to that question. We answer with Luther: “Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word.” Certainly, “without God’s word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit” (Small Catechism, Baptism, First and Third). God’s word makes the difference!

In a similar way people might wonder, why should we listen to John. By all appearances, he’s a bit ... eccentric. He wears a camel-hair garment tied up with a leather belt. He eats locusts and wild honey. Whatever you might want to say about that, that doesn’t seem normal. It doesn’t seem right, but it is the way that the prophet Elijah was described, with “*a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist*” (2 Ki. 1:8). And John’s refraining from drinking “*wine or strong drink*” (Luke 1:15) is a lot like how Samson, a Judge dedicated to God’s service as a Nazirite, was conceived (Judges 13:4ff). I don’t know about locusts, but Samson ate honey, too (Judges 14:8-9).

These connections were apparently enough for “*Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan*” to flock to John to hear him preach, to receive his message of repentance, and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Even the Jewish leaders, “*the Pharisees and Sadducees,*” came out to John to see what the commotion was, and perhaps even to be baptized by him.

Let us listen to him as well ... listen to his preparatory message. Let us listen to John’s prophetic message that points us to the branch from the stump of Jesse, David’s son and David’s Lord (Matt. 22:21-25). The Spirit of the Lord would be upon Him. Righteousness and equity would issue forth from His mouth. A “*robe of righteousness*” He would wear (Isa. 61:10), girded about His waist with a belt of righteousness and faithfulness (Isa. 11:5). Filled with this righteousness, but bearing our sins, Jesus would go to the cross as the perfect sacrifice for sin, “*the [spotless] Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). Do what they would do to this “green wood” (Luke 23:31), it would bear fruit (John 12:24), not

just among the Jews, but among the Gentiles, too, of which we bear witness by our faith and life, for we hope in this “*root of Jesse.*”

For repentance is not a singular event, but one of ongoing significance. John said it this way: “*Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*” John’s preaching prefigured Jesus’ call to repentance, and at Reformation we were reminded again how Luther preached that, when Jesus told us to repent, “he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (*Luther’s Works*, 31:25).

Faith and the fruit of faith ... they are inseparable. Here again is Luther: “O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works. ¶ Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work that the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire” (*Luther’s Works*, 35:370–71).

That’s Luther, and here is John again: “*Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*” The same message; and this bearing fruit is accomplished only by faith, by abiding in the branch from the stump of Jesse. As Jesus said, “*If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned*” (John 15:6).

But fire is not for you, O faithful ones, who live in repentance, who bear fruit worthy of repentance. You are the wheat, not the chaff. And when Jesus comes again — this time in glory — you’ll not be burned in the unquenchable fire, but you will be gathered into the Lord Jesus’ harvest barns and taken to the bliss of everlasting life. That’s the hope of Jew and Gentile alike as we look to Jesus, to the branch that came forth from the stump of Jesse. And that’s why we, with prophet, apostle, and psalmist, cry out: “*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.*” “*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.*” And we say, “Amen. We’re glad You came for us long ago. Come again, Lord Jesus. Come soon.”

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