

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Lord Jesus said, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, ’ ... ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’*” (Rev. 1:8), and a bit later, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end*” (Rev. 22:13).

Truly, from the first to the last, from the beginning to the ending, the Good News is all about Jesus. In our Epistle, Peter speaks about the ending, the coming of “*the day of the Lord ...like a thief*” according to His promise, coming after patiently waiting for all who were chosen in Christ Jesus to “*reach repentance.*”

Isaiah and Mark speak about the beginning, Isaiah prophesying of the beginning, foretelling the coming of the “*herald of good news,*” who would proclaim, “*Behold, your God,*” and Mark bearing witness to the beginning, with John the Baptist preaching this Good News, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy, a not-so-lonely voice in the wilderness, pointing the world to “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).

John the Baptist’s preaching is that beginning — at least by men. To be sure, we’ll hear the proclamation of the Savior’s birth on Christmas Eve, but that was by an angel, not man. We’ll hear the angel chorus proclaim: “*Glory to God in the highest*” (Luke 2:10-14), but those were not the preaching of men.

Mark isn’t suggesting that the salvation story started then. Surely, the story began in eternity without measure, as we’ll hear on Christmas Day, with the Word who was in the beginning, who was with God in the beginning, who is very God Himself, “*the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:1, 14). It began with the Father’s choosing in eternity ... in Christ “*even ... before the foundation of the world,*” predestinating “*us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ*” (Eph. 1:4-5).

But we don’t encounter eternity in the Baptist’s preaching; we don’t hear about Jesus’ birth. No, the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel happens with John’s words of repentance, and forgiveness, and with baptizing. This was the preparation John was sent to bring about —for the people then and for us now.

John calls out sin. He calls out prideful confidence in one’s roots; it will not save you! Repent! He calls out heartless disregard for others! Repent! He calls out lying and cheating. Repent! He calls out threats and false accusations. Repent! He calls out covetousness! Repent!

And you? “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy?” Repent! “Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or

quarrelsome?” Repent! “Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds?” Repent! “Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?” Repent!

Repentance puts mankind on the path to receive the Good News. Without acknowledging our wretchedness and our need for a rescue from it, the Good News of Jesus is received with indifference. The Good News of forgiveness of sins is received with a shrug of the shoulders. Who cares? Who needs it?

With this preaching, we realize, we need it. With this preaching, John prepares our hearts to receive the Gospel. With this preaching John levels out the rough places and straightens out the crooked. He leads us to confess our sins that we may hear that we are forgiven them, that God does not keep a record of our sins, that He pardons our iniquities. This is the comfort that God bestows so freely upon us by His Gospel.

He bestows it by His word of promise. He bestows it by His holy Sacraments, by the Supper “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin,” and by Baptism.

We Lutherans esteem both of these Sacraments, but today Baptism is set especially before our eyes. We know that God is at work in this water. Like John’s baptism, Christian baptism is “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” We come to the font renouncing the devil and all his works and all his ways, trusting that, by this water, our sins are washed away. In that way, these two are the same. Of Christian baptism, we recite in the catechism: it “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare” (Small Catechism, Baptism, Second Part).

But John tells us that the baptism Jesus has instituted is more, for Christ is the mightier One, and Christ is the one who empowers Christian baptism ... by His own sacrifice. Christian baptism unites us, the baptized, to Jesus and to His death and resurrection.

You know the words from St. Paul — we’ll say them again this week as we lay to rest our dear brother Bryce: “*all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death*”; *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*” “[*W*]e have been united with him in a death like his, [therefore,] we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3-5). These are comforting words for us, for the promise contained in the baptismal waters is sure. We repeat them at funerals because we know that by our baptism we have been prepared to meet our Lord and our God.

Still more, Christ empowers Christian baptism with the Holy Spirit. John teaches us: the mightier One “*will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” Truly, He, on whom the Spirit came down and rested, now gives us the Holy Spirit in our baptism, and He empowers us to believe and confess.

Peter unites all of these things together — repentance and baptism and forgiveness and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When the people on Pentecost asked, “*what shall we do,*” “*Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’*” (Acts 2:37-38), and by the Holy Spirit, again, we are empowered to believe and confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and lead holy lives.

So, John’s preaching marks the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, and his preaching points us to Jesus, to repentance and forgiveness, to baptism; even so, this preaching marks the ending, for Jesus commissioned the disciples to go forth baptizing, with Jesus’ promise to be with us in His word and Sacraments (Matt. 28:19-20). And, Jesus commissioned them further as witnesses of His suffering, death, and resurrection, to preach the message of repentance and forgiveness in His name — empowered again by the Holy Spirit.

His church preaches this Gospel still: Jesus, repentance, baptism, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit — believe it; confess it, in patient confidence. Be comforted in the preaching of this Gospel, from first to last, from beginning to ending. John began it; we’ll preach it to the end, when Christ will come again. Christ is surely coming.

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