

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday we focused on Jesus' final advent into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey's colt to the joy and praise of His disciples. It was in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy: "*Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted ... on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (Zech. 9:9).

In today's Gospel, the coming is not that of Jesus, but of him who at his birth was proclaimed to be "*the prophet of the Most High,*" the prophet who would come before Jesus so that he could "*go before [Jesus] to prepare his ways*" (Luke 1:76).

His coming was also in fulfillment of a prophecy. He was the messenger foretold long ago by the LORD's messenger, Malachi. Here it seems to me that the Spirit is being a bit playful. The name Malachi means "my messenger," and through His messenger Malachi, the LORD promised to send "my messenger" Malachi. Of course, He wouldn't be named Malachi; he wouldn't be named after his father Zechariah either. Instead, he would be given the unexpected name of John as instructed by yet another messenger, the angel Gabriel.

But it's not his coming as a child that we hear about in our Gospel today, a mere 6 months older than his cousin Jesus; it's the grown John out in the wilderness around the Jordan River preaching to the people, "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

This is the preparation Malachi prophesied. This is the preparation Isaiah foretold: "*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*"

That's what John's message of "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt. 3:2) was intended to do: to fill in every valley and knock down every hill that stood as an obstacle keeping "*the children of Israel*" from turning "*to the Lord their God*"; it was to straighten every crooked way that was turning "*the hearts of the fathers [away from] the children,*" calling them to "*return to the Lord your God*"; it was to smooth out the rough places of disobedience, calling the people back to "*the wisdom of the just,*" that is, to the just God who is also "*gracious and merciful, ...abounding in steadfast love*" (Luke 1:16-17; Ps. 145:8). Repentance — that's the way "*to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*"

So, we hear John the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth preaching in the wilderness, in "*the region around the Jordan*" River, preparing the people for the

coming of the LORD of hosts ... preparing our hearts, too, as we listen to this forerunner refine us by his fiery talk of repentance and cleanse us by pointing us to the mightier one who was coming, pointing us to His baptism filled with the Holy Spirit and fire, a baptism that saves (1 Peter 3:21), a baptism that wouldn't merely wash dirt off the body, but that would take hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:26), that would take consciences dead in trespasses and sins and make them alive through faith in Him to whom John pointed (Eph. 2:5, 8).

John preached repentance and bearing fruit in keeping with repentance — this was part of his purifying message “*against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear*” the Lord. And so, John instructed the crowds that flocked out to the wilderness to hear him to repent — turn from this wickedness, and instead share with others from your abundance; instead, treat people fairly, he said to the tax collectors; don't cheat them; instead, don't extort money by force, he told the soldiers; be content with your wages.

But repentance is only the first step. Ultimately, John prepared the people by pointing to the One coming after him, yet who ranked as greater than he because He was before John. For John did not proclaim himself. His coming was not to promote himself, but the coming of the Lord. John denied he was the long-expected Christ. He denied that he was the promised Prophet like Moses. And though he denied that he was the Elijah whose coming would signal that the Messiah is near, John was in fact the Elijah whose coming Malachi also prophesied, who would “*turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers*” (Mal. 4:6; Matt. 11:14).

Yes, John would have the opportunity to preach not just the law and repentance, but the Good News of Jesus Christ. He would baptize Jesus, though he recognized that Jesus had no need of his baptism and instead, John needed Jesus' baptism. But Jesus insisted, and in baptizing Jesus, John would see “*the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and [remain] on [Jesus]*” (John 1:32). And that epiphany would show John who Jesus was: He was the Christ, anointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38); He was the Son of God (John 1:34) come from the Father's side (John 1:18); Jesus was “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29), that is, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was the perfect sacrifice for us. The death of this lamb without blemish would atone for the sins of the world. John calls us to faith in Him.

God grant that we might recognize John as the Lord's messenger sent to prepare us for the coming of the Lord. God grant that we might listen to his preaching of repentance. God grant that we might repent of all attempts to obscure the cross in

this holy season that prepares for the incarnation of our Lord. God grant that we might see in Jesus the salvation of God, the Savior of the world, the Lamb slaughtered for our sins. And having been thus prepared, may we come and receive the Body and Blood of that same Lamb of God; may we eat and drink and have our sins taken away.

In the words of the hymn of the day, “Then cleansed be ev’ry life from sin; Make straight the way for God within, And let us all our hearts prepare For Christ to come and enter there. . . . All praise, eternal Son, to Thee Whose advent sets Thy people free. Whom with the Father we adore And Holy Spirit evermore” (LSB344:2, 5).

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