

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

I showed a photo in the LSUS chapel this past week. I had taken this photo of a painting of John the Baptist—I don't remember in which Art Gallery it was hanging. It was a rather unflattering depiction of John, and I asked them, "Suppose this man came up to your house and knocked on your door. What would you have done?" The answers were varied: "screamed," "locked the door," "run away."

If the local news people had gotten ahold of this guy, there might have been stories of a scary man walking around town scaring people, not unlike the stories this fall of people wearing the scary clown masks.

Indeed, in our image-driven culture, John the Baptist would have definitely been considered countercultural and maybe even dangerous. A garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist—that was his attire! Locusts and wild honey his regular mealtime fare! He was a "*voice ... crying in the wilderness,*" preaching repentance—certainly countercultural and, yes, considered dangerous by many!

But it would behoove us as Christians to listen to his message, for he is the one sent to "*Prepare the way of the Lord; [to]make his paths straight.*" He is the Elijah that the prophet Malachi foretold would precede the coming of the Lord. It is interesting, don't you think, that Elijah, too, was described as one who wore "*a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist*" (2 Kings 1:8).

It behooves us to listen to John's message because it is a churchly message. His message is the same message the church has been given to proclaim: "*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" It's the same message that Jesus Himself preached and that He gave to His disciples to proclaim in His name after He had died and risen from the dead—along with the forgiveness of sins. It has always been the message that God wants His church to proclaim as Jesus taught: "*Then [Jesus] opened [the disciples'] minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'*" (Luke 24:45-46).

John's message in the wilderness was to prepare the people's hearts for the way of the Lord, to make straight paths for him. Though the Lord came for you—He was born for you and died for you and rose again for you—and He will come again in glory—an amazing time when predator and prey will lie down together, and both carnivore and herbivore will graze together—nevertheless, the Lord still comes to you today, to bring heaven down to you in the here and now. He comes in this message proclaimed: "*Christ crucified*" for you (1 Cor. 1:23), "*Jesus Christ, risen from the dead*" (2 Tim. 2:8), and "*Repent and be baptized everyone of you*

for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). And this message is for the church, for the “*congregation of saints,*” not just for unbelievers.

This message is important for us gathered here today because God does not want foolish self-deceptions; He does not want haughty self-righteousness; He does not want defensive self-justifications; he does not want defiant rationalizations. That's what John the Baptist had to deal with in the Pharisees and Sadducees who would not humble themselves before God and His prophet. They thought they were something special according to the flesh—Abraham's children by natural descent—God's chosen people. And, indeed, they were chosen—that God's chosen one, the Messiah, would come through this people and redeem them through the seed of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

But they had forgotten the covenant God made with them; they had forgotten what God wanted from them—namely that He alone would be their God and they His people. Therefore, the axe had been laid to the root of this tree, and all that remained was Jesse's stump. This is what our jealous God wanted: their faithfulness, casting away all idols both of others and of self, but they refused. What God wanted from them was a broken spirit, but theirs was proud; He wanted a contrite heart, but theirs was hardened. What God wanted from them were trusting hearts and confessing lips, but “*this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*” (Matt. 15:8); what God wanted from them was that they repent and be forgiven, that they worship only the Lord their God and serve Him only, that they bear fruit in keeping with repentance—but they did not.

God wants the same thing from us. He wants us to have no other gods—that is, He wants us to fear and love and trust in Him above all things. He wants our humble, broken spirits and our contrite hearts. He wants our trusting hearts and confessing lips. He want us to repent of our sins and our sinfulness, and to be forgiven; He wants us to be baptized and have our sins washed away—like Ahríus was this morning—but more He wants us daily to remember our baptisms by contrition and repentance. He wants us to drown the old Adam in us, to acknowledge what our flesh is like and what our flesh works. He wants the new man to come forth to worship him in spirit and truth; He wants us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

You see, this is how the church operates. It's not that we are perfect, at least, not according to our own flesh. We're sinners, and that's okay, for that means God calls us to Him, for Jesus “*came not to call the righteous, but sinners*” to Himself (Matt. 9:13). He calls us to repentance—“for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment” (Small Catechism, LP, 5th Petition). He calls us to repentance that we may be forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ who cleanses us from all sin, that we may receive a righteousness and perfection that is not our own, an alien righteousness that covers over our unrighteousness, our

imperfections, our sins. It's this righteousness, Christ's righteousness, that Ahríus received today as He put on Christ. And so have you received this righteousness in your baptisms and everlasting life in Him. A righteous branch did come forth from the stump of Jesse, and this branch bears abundant fruit—sinners who have been declared righteous in God's sight, cleansed by the blood of Jesus, hearts sprinkled clean in the pure waters of Holy Baptism.

And just as God deals with us not as our sins deserve but with grace, so in our dealings with one another, God calls us to treat one another in the same way, confessing to one another and forgiving one another. Jesus said, "*Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him*" (Luke 17:3-4).

You see, our sin is not meant to be overlooked, ignored or covered up. We are to acknowledge it and confess it and forgive it and forget it. Yes, we hear that the last one is hard to do, but they are all hard to do. It's hard to acknowledge that you did wrong; it's hard to confess it. It's hard to forgive; we don't like to say those words. It's hard to forget. And we'll never do it perfectly like our God does who, as a pastor once said to me, has "holy amnesia." Still, even though we can't do it perfectly, we're called to "sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us" (Small Catechism, LP, 5th Petition).

Yes, repentance and forgiveness: it was John's message; it was Jesus' message; it's the church's message. And when you hear it, regardless what the messenger looks like, regardless how unpopular it is, you can know you're in the right place, for there you will find sinners dealing with sinners in a churchly way, sinners repenting of their sins with broken spirits and contrite hearts, sinners trusting in the forgiveness Christ won by His blood, sinners coming to be baptized and daily returning to the cleansing waters of their baptisms, sinners speaking words of forgiveness in Christ to one another, sinners in repentant joy eating and drinking Christ's body and blood as the kingdom of heaven comes to them in Christ's holy meal, sinners encouraging and building one another up in Christ.

God grant that spirit to us in this Advent season of preparation and faithfulness to this message in our church all year long.

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