

THE CHRIST IS COMING

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Third Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 17, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 1, verses 6 through 8; then we'll skip down to verses 19 through 28. It is on page 750 of the pew Bible.

In this gospel lesson, we are introduced to John the Baptist and his ministry. Now, just to clarify, John the Baptist is not the same John for whom *The Gospel of John* is named. The book is named for John, the disciple of Jesus, who wrote the gospel. He's a different John than John the Baptist. Also, John the Baptist was not a Baptist in the same way we speak of Baptists today. That wasn't a thing back then. If anything, based on John's belief that Baptism grants the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), he comes across as more Lutheran than anything, but people weren't called Lutherans back then either. So John is called "the Baptist" simply because he baptized people.

In this text we learn who John was and what he cared about. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 1, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

And now skipping down to verse 19,

¹⁹And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²²So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water, ~~but~~ among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a weird conversation—the one John has with these priests and Levites.

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John was something of a celebrity. He was out in the wilderness, beyond the Jordan River, and people from Jerusalem and the whole region of Judea were going out to see him and be baptized by him. This really demonstrates his celebrity status.

A few times a year we have celebrities come to Grand Forks—usually for a concert or something. And people from all the little towns come to Grand Forks to see the celebrity. People from Reynolds, Thompson, Larimore, Grafton, and Fisher all come to Grand Forks to see the celebrity. But imagine it's reversed. The celebrity isn't in Grand Forks. He's out in a field by Reynolds. So all the people flock to this random field in the country—people from Grand Forks and Fargo and Minneapolis. You even have people from Chicago and L.A. and New York flying in to see this celebrity who keeps himself confined to a field near Reynolds. It would take someone very unique to get people from the big cities to come out to the country. But that's John the Baptist.

Jerusalem was the religious, cultural, and political center of Israel. Everything important happened there. But John doesn't go there. He doesn't even stay in the region of Judea, where most of the Jews lived. John himself was born into a priestly family. His father, Zechariah, was a priest. He actually served inside the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 1:8-9). This meant John was eligible to be a priest too. But he leaves Jerusalem and does something else. He crosses the border into the region beyond the Jordan River. Apparently there was another village named Bethany over there. Now this isn't the same Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived. That Bethany was near Jerusalem, but this Bethany was beyond the Jordan River (1:28). We don't even know where exactly this other Bethany was, other than the fact that it was on the other side of the Jordan but probably fairly close to the river. That tells us how insignificant it was—that we don't even know where it was. But this is where John goes, and the Jews leave Jerusalem and Judea to go see him there.

So John is something of a religious celebrity. He's intriguing enough to draw people out of Jerusalem and Judea. So the Pharisees send some of their priests and Levites to see about this guy John. They get there and have this weird conversation.

Their first question is right to the point. They ask, "Who are you?" And John has a weird answer, but he has a reason for answering the way he does. He says, "I am not the Christ." Now this is a strange way to answer the question. Imagine you meet someone new after church, and you say, "Hi, I'm Dan—or whatever your name is—who are you?" And they say, "I am not the Christ." That would be a little strange. You would probably say, "Yeah, I didn't think you were. But you still didn't answer my question."

Now John was a bit more famous than we are. Perhaps there were actually a few people who did think he was the Christ. But his answer is still strange. Instead of telling them who he's not, he could have just told them who he is and spared them the weird conversation. But the Christ is really the person John wants to talk about, so he finds a way to work him into the conversation at the very beginning. We see that John is obsessed with the Christ, and rightly so. If you offered John a cup of coffee, he would probably say, "Do you know what else has six letters and starts with a 'C'?"

But eventually John gets around to telling these priests and Levites who he is, and then we understand why he tried to change the subject. John is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' " (1:23). His job is not to draw attention to

himself, but to draw as much attention as possible to the Christ, who is Jesus of Nazareth. John is the herald of good news: “Behold! Here comes the Lord!”

John is the guy who introduces the guy. You know those fancy banquets where you have a really special speaker. He’s so special that you have another guy make a speech to introduce the really special speaker. John is the introduction guy. John’s job is to introduce the Christ. Then he sits down and let’s Jesus do his thing.

One of the things John did to introduce people to Jesus was baptize them. He says, “I baptize with water” (1:26). And then most translations insert a word that isn’t actually there. They insert the word “but,” but it’s not actually in the text. It’s simply, “I baptize with water.” Period. Then, “Among you stands one you do not know” (1:26). Most translations make it sound like John is minimizing his ministry of baptizing, but he’s not. John’s baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). We should never minimize a thing like that. It’s more like John is explaining why he was baptizing. He was baptizing because there was someone among them—someone really important—who is Christ the Lord. In preparation for the revealing of the Christ, these Jews received “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). God himself was coming to his people, and he already stood among them, though they did not recognize him yet.

So John confessed that he was not worthy to even stoop down and untie Jesus’ sandal (1:27). I always thought that sounded kind of strange, but I never really gave too much thought to it. Why would anyone stoop down and untie Jesus’ sandal? It almost sounds like a prank kids play when they sneak up behind each other and untie their shoes. But it’s not that. John and Jesus were cousins, and they probably played together as kids, but we don’t really know what kind of pranks they played on each other. The sandal thing had to do with the ancient practice of foot washing. Most of the travel in the ancient world was done by walking. Some people rode on animals, but animals were more often used to carry your stuff. So most people walked everywhere. And everyone in Israel wore sandals. That meant their feet were exposed to the dust, the dirt, and everything else that was on the road, including the stuff left there by donkeys and oxen. And this was before the invention of those little plastic bags you use to pick up the stuff your dog leaves on the sidewalk. So when you finally get home from a day of walking all over town, your feet might be kind of dirty. So if you had any servants, washing your feet was a job reserved for the lowest of them. But John did not even consider himself worthy of this menial and disgusting task. Washing Jesus’ feet was not *beneath* John. Washing Jesus’ feet was *above* John. He did not consider himself worthy to clean dirt and feces out from between Jesus’ toes. He didn’t even consider himself worthy to begin the task by removing Jesus’ sandal. Why? Because Jesus is the Lord. He is the Christ. He is the Son of God in human flesh. John knew who he was, and he knew who Jesus was, so he didn’t even dare to touch Jesus’ dirty sandal.

But enough about John. John would be embarrassed to know we spent this much time talking about him. He would advise us to stop talking about him so much, and start talking about the Christ. So let’s do that.

What's so great about the Christ? Jesus himself said, **"Among those born of women none is greater than John"** (Luke 7:28). But John considered Jesus to be far more important, and Jesus agreed (5:36). So why is Jesus so great? Jesus was a prophet, just like Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist. But he exceeded all the prophets before him, both in his person and in his work. That is, Jesus exceeded them in who he is and by what he did. His identity is greater, and his actions are greater.

Moses prophesied that an even greater prophet would arise from among the people of Israel (Deut. 18:15, 18). So the priests and Levites asked John the Baptist if he was that prophet. But he said, "No" (1:21), because Jesus is that prophet, and John knew it. But when John announced the coming of the Christ, he didn't say, "Make straight the way of an even better prophet." He said, "Make straight the way of the Lord" (1:23). This prophet is more than a prophet, because he is God himself.

Now prophets generally did two things. The first was proclaim the Word of the Lord. But when Jesus proclaimed the Word of the Lord, he wasn't proclaiming someone else's word. He was proclaiming his *own* Word. This is God in human flesh, proclaiming God's Word. Jesus exceeds all the prophets before him, because he is more than a mere man. He is true God, and he is true man, doing the work of a prophet.

The second thing prophets generally did—and this wasn't something they tried to do; it usually just happened to them. The second thing prophets did was suffer (Acts 7:52). This was bound to happen when they spoke the Word of the Lord, because it often offended people. John the Baptist was a good example of this. He got his head chopped off. The king stole his brother's wife. John had something to say about it. The wife didn't like it, so she asked the king to chop off John's head, and he did (Matt. 14:8). We do this when we don't like something God's Word says. Maybe we don't actually chop someone's head off. Okay; I'm pretty sure none of us have ever done that. But there's a reason, "Don't kill the messenger," has become a saying. We don't like it when someone comes to us with the Word of God and says, "Look, your behavior or your beliefs are not right. You need to repent." John did this, and he suffered for it. Jesus did it too, and he suffered a lot for it.

And this leads us to the second way Jesus exceeds the prophets before him. The first is in his identity—that he is God in human flesh. And the second is in his work—his actions—what he did. Most of the prophets suffered, but Jesus' suffering exceeds the suffering of the prophets before him, because the primary purpose of Jesus' ministry was to suffer, and his suffering accomplished far more than the suffering of the earlier prophets. Those prophets suffered as a *result* of their proclamation. But Jesus' suffering was the *whole purpose* for which he came. By his suffering he won salvation for all mankind.

And unlike the prophets before him, Jesus had the ability to avoid his suffering, but he didn't. Many of the earlier prophets complained to God about their suffering. But Jesus—as God in human flesh—could have escaped his suffering. He could have ended it at any time. But he didn't. He refused to end it, even when he was mocked by those who watched him die. He refused to end his suffering, because he came **"not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45).

John the Baptist was right when he considered himself unworthy to untie Jesus' sandal—just the first step in washing his feet. But if John had tried to wash Jesus' feet, I doubt Jesus

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would have allowed it, not because John was unworthy, but because Jesus did not come to be served. When his own disciple, Peter, tried to wash Jesus' feet, he refused (13:6). Instead, Jesus washed his disciples' feet—all of them—even the one who would betray him. Jesus got his own hands dirty with the dust and dirt and feces. But this was only the start of his service and humiliation. Jesus contaminated himself, not merely with the filth on the outside of the body, but with the filth on the inside. This was the whole point of his taking on human flesh. It was the whole point of his suffering. He contaminated himself in order to cleanse us without and within.

And in this way, Jesus exceeds all the prophets before him. He was much better at suffering, he suffered far more than any of them did, and his suffering accomplished the greatest purpose of all—the forgiveness of sins and the life of the world.

It is because of this that the Word of God does more than simply reveal where our actions and beliefs have gone wrong. It reveals what God has done about it, and it proclaims the forgiveness of these sins. It tells us what to believe. It tells us who to trust—the God-Man Jesus Christ, who has taken these sins from you. He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). He suffered. He died. He rose again. So you are forgiven. You are redeemed. And you are promised a home in Jesus' eternal kingdom. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.