

The Third Sunday in Advent – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 11:2-10: “The Message Makes the Messenger Matter.”
December 10/11, 2022 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Merciful Father, You sent John to prepare the people for the gracious appearance of Your Son in the flesh, and You still send messengers to point people to the salvation He won for all. Grant that we may faithfully and gladly hear Your Word, take comfort in Your sure promises, and share the hope we have with others, that with us they may also obtain eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.” / As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.’” (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who shares His righteousness, honor, and glory with us, not because of our own worthiness, but because of His great mercy and grace toward us, dear fellow redeemed:

You probably haven’t heard the name “Pheidippides” before, but I think you know his story. He was a resident of Athens when Greece was beginning to develop a democratic form of government. The Persian Empire viewed Greece’s move toward independence as a threat, and a Persian fleet was sent to attack the city of Athens. The Persians landed on the coast of Greece at a place called Marathon. Seeing that the Athenian army was on better ground for fighting, the Persian commander divided his force and sent part of it by sea toward Athens which had been left unguarded. The Athenians, realizing that time was running out, attacked the Persian army and routed it.

To let the people of Athens know that help was on the way, a messenger named Pheidippides was sent off. He ran as fast as he could, covering a distance of about twenty-five miles before the Persian fleet arrived in Athens. With his last breath, he declared “victory!” and died. His

message saved the people of Athens, and his heroic effort is remembered by the 26.2 mile marathon races held all over the world each year.

There are many examples like this of a messenger becoming famous for the message he brought. Paul Revere with his “midnight ride” comes to mind. He hurried around warning the revolutionaries that the British were coming. We remember him because of his message. And this is also why we remember John the Baptist.

John’s purpose was set for him before he even existed. The angel Gabriel told his father Zechariah that he and his elderly wife would have a son whom they were to name John. John would be “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*” He would “*turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God*” and would “*make ready for the Lord a people prepared*” (Luk. 1:13,16,17). When he was about thirty years old, John went preaching in the wilderness of Judea. His message was this, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Mat. 3:2).

The crowds started to gather around this bold preacher. He didn’t talk like the teachers of the Law. He didn’t care whose feathers he ruffled. He didn’t appear to have any angles; he wasn’t doing this for himself. The people knew he was special—a prophet sent by God. Some even wondered if he might be the Messiah. John shut off all speculation. “I am a voice,” he said. “I am only a messenger. Don’t look to me—listen to me!”

This is what made John so great. He deflected all attention from himself to the Savior. And this is what Jesus wanted the people to understand about John. He asked them what they went out into the wilderness to see. Did they go to see “*a reed shaken by the wind,*” one who spoke an uncertain and weak message? Obviously not, since everyone knew how boldly and fiercely John preached. Did they expect to find “*a man dressed in soft clothing*”? Not at all. John was no “pretty boy.” He wore clothes made out of rough camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. Hardly dressed to impress.

So did they go to see a prophet? “Yes,” said Jesus, “*and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.’*” John was the watchman crying out that the Bridegroom has come. He was the herald announcing the coming of the King. He was important not because of his own abilities or his own credentials. He was important because of who came after Him.

It is offensive when someone acts like a “big deal,” not because he has done anything significant, but because he is related to or tied to someone significant. The spoiled children of a rich person might behave like this or the relatives of someone who is famous. John was actually famous in his own right, but he knew his place. He knew that the One who followed Him, whose message he proclaimed, was far greater. John said, “I’m not even worthy to untie His sandals” (Luk. 3:16).

This is the understanding that all of us should have about our connection to Jesus. We do not give Him something He lacks; He gives us everything that we lack. We do not make a name for ourselves; He gives His name and all His accomplishments to us. We do not deserve honor and glory for our successes; He deserves the glory. We do not tell Him what to do; He tells us.

In the kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down: greatness is found in humility; strength is found in weakness; victory is found in defeat. The unbelieving world and our sinful nature along with it, rebel at these things. We want to be great because of what we do. We want to stand on our own two feet. We want to win. We want others to bow down to us, to recognize how gifted we are.

And sometimes we even act this way toward God. We get mad at Him when things don't go the way we want them to, as though our plans are better than His. Or we forget about Him when things go well for us, imagining that we have only ourselves to thank for our success. We complain about what we don't have, instead of thanking Him for what we do have. We think we deserve to have more, when our heavenly Father has already given us the kingdom by faith in His Son (Luk. 12:32).

And what does the Lord do about us prideful, self-centered beings? How does He respond to our impatience and complaining? What we deserve is for every good thing we have—which God has given to us—to be taken away. We deserve to have all honor, all goodness, all joy stripped away from us. But that is not what Jesus does.

Instead He puts Himself at our service. He comes to meet us in our weakness, our failure, our sin. He brings us forgiveness for thinking that everything revolves around us. He cleanses our hearts and minds of all our pride, all our thinking that our ways are the best, that we need nothing more than ourselves.

This is why God took on flesh, to save us sinners. This is what He made clear to the disciples of John, that He was here to heal, cleanse, give life, and preach good news. *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him"* (Joh. 3:17). Jesus came to take up your sins and your sorrows and carry them to the cross where atonement was made. And He still comes through the means of grace to apply His saving work to you.

This is what you have come today to hear. This is what I have been called to preach. I have nothing to give you of my own, at least nothing that can benefit your soul. What I proclaim to you is not mine, but His who sent me. Every faithful preacher is like John, a messenger pointing to Jesus. Today's Epistle lesson speaks about the work of preachers: *"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"* (1Co. 4:1).

I am not your boss. I am not your lord. I am a servant of God and a steward who proclaims His Word and administers His Sacraments. I am not above you; I join you in receiving the rich gifts of our Savior. Each one of us is a beggar with empty hands, which Jesus fills with His perfect works, His totally sufficient life of holiness.

This is the clear message of God's Word, and it is why we rejoice today. The rose-colored candle and bulletin, and in some churches the rose-colored cloth on the altar and pulpit, remind us that the season of Advent is not all repentance. It is also a rejoicing at what Jesus came to do and what He fully accomplished. His work shows undeniably that you matter to God. You might not feel like you matter much in the world, but the world's glory is only temporary, and it is never enough.

You matter to God because He says so. His incarnate Son died to take away your sins. He rose from the dead to destroy the grip that death had on you. He chose you to be His own and adopted you in the waters of Baptism. And He still meets you to impart His eternal blessings to you, even feeding you with His holy body and blood.

This is the message of God. It is the message that comforts you, strengthens you, gives you hope. It is the message that assures you of your value to God. It is the message *"for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself"* (Act. 2:39). God does this calling through each one of us. He puts people in our lives who are hurting, lost, confused, and He calls us to share with them the hope we have. We don't have to say everything perfectly. We don't have to practice the exact words to use. We simply tell them who we are in Christ. We tell them what He has done for us. We tell them that on our own we are nothing, but in Him we have everything.

And if we enjoy a good reputation in our communities, if anyone speaks well of us and wants to give us credit for the good things we accomplish, we can do what John did. We point to Jesus. We are just the messengers. It is the message that matters most. Jesus is the Source; He is the Savior. With John we point to Him and say, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (Joh. 1:29).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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