

“Among You Stands One You Do Not Know”

In the name of our coming King, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In our time together last week we were re-introduced to John the Baptizer, who unsettled his original hearers with an urgent Advent message about their need to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And John was very thorough. People were thinking, “Oh, great, the Messiah is on the way. Let’s do what John says. Let’s sweep the house, put on our best clothes, set the table for a fancy meal – hey, let’s go all the way and light a couple candles! Now we’re ready to receive our king.” “Not by long shot”, John said. “I tell you what: you do all that stuff you said to get ready; but when you light those candles, use a flamethrower! Burn it all up! How dare you imagine that all you need is a little light housekeeping and a few cosmetic changes to prepare for the coming of the Lord. You don’t seem to understand. Our *God* is coming – the Holy One of Israel, in whose presence sinners cannot stand. He is coming in might and fury to judge you. Every sin you have done, every idle word you have spoken, every selfish, lustful, prideful, hateful, or otherwise ungodly thought of your heart—these are all *outrageous* offenses to him. They fill him with righteous anger. And your pathetic, half-hearted attempts to gloss them over only make him madder. His standard is nothing short of sinless perfection. Everything else he will burn in eternal hellfire.”

John told it like it was. And when John finished preaching, the crowds who came out to the desert to hear him were left trembling in fear. They were cut in their hearts, and they were made to cry out to the Lord for mercy, for forgiveness, and for salvation. And when they got to that point John said, “Now you’re ready to receive the King.”

Two thousand years later, the message of John has not changed one bit. And through the preaching of faithful pastors his alarming message continues to this day: Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare to receive your King. Examine your heart. Review all of your relationships. Bring into the light of God’s perfect Law all in you that is shameful, unclean, and unholy. Root out your hypocrisy, your pride, and your selfishness. Dig into all the dark corners of your soul. See and understand exactly how unworthy you are to stand before the King. And come clean. Acknowledge your sin. Confess your guilt. Cry out to the Lord for mercy. For only then will you too will be ready to receive the King.

That’s what we heard from John last week. It’s a message that never gets old because we are always unworthy; so we need to hear it again and again, and remain at all times in a state of repentance. But it’s only half of what John preached to those who came to hear him – which leads me to today’s Gospel reading and the other half of John’s mission and ministry.

So travel with me once again to the desert. Let’s join the many others who are making the pilgrimage down from the comparatively cool and breezy Judean highlands to the suffocatingly hot, sun-scorched plain of the Jordan River some four thousand feet below. Let’s gather with those who have come to be shaken out of their comfort zones and spiritual lethargy by this amazing man who has created such a stir with his dire warnings and his hellfire and brimstone preaching. Go ahead. Place yourself there in the crowd. And let’s listen.

For there’s been an interruption. An official delegation of priests and Levites has been sent from Jerusalem to question John. They are none too happy with him. He’s not operating within their normal religious channels. And that’s their job. It’s their responsibility. They are the religious leaders and teachers of the nation. He’s stepping on their toes. And they don’t like the

fact that John is so popular. It makes them jealous. They are also legitimately concerned that he might be another self-proclaimed Messiah playing off people's hopes and fears. There have been several such upstarts in recent history who led brief rebellions against Roman occupation. They all ended up dead – which was no great loss. The trouble was that they led so many others astray who also ended up dead. And each one caused yet another crackdown by the Roman authorities that made everyone in the nation suffer sometimes for years after their uprisings were crushed.

These priests and Levites know very well that some of the people are wondering aloud if John might be the Christ. And they fear that if John gets a big enough following, he just might be seduced into thinking it himself. So they've come to question him. They want to bring him down a few notches in the sight of the crowd. They want to challenge his authority. They want to make sure he's not a threat to them or to anyone else.

But the answers they get from John only lead to frustration. "Do you think that you are the Christ?" "No, I am not the Christ." "Who, then? Are you Elijah come back down heaven?" "No, I'm not." "Are you the prophet whose coming was foretold by Moses?" "No." "Well then who *are* you? We need to have an answer to give to those who sent us." "Me? I'm nobody. I am merely a voice – a voice of one crying in the desert 'Prepare the way of the Lord', just as the prophet Isaiah said."

"Well, look here: if you really are nobody special, not the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet, then why are you baptizing people? Who gave you the authority to do this? Just what exactly are you up to, John?" And here John's answer is telling: "I baptize in water, but among you stands one whom you do not know ... the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

Think about what John is saying. You're in the crowd, remember. He just said that one of the people standing here with you is the Christ. He's here. His feet are touching the same sand as yours. What would you do? Look around, wouldn't you? Try to figure out who John was talking about ... which one of these fellow pilgrims was your King? But what would you see? You know in the pictures they make of Jesus, it's always easy to spot him. He's the guy in the center with the perfectly white robe and the bright red sash. He's clean, neat, and practically glowing. He doesn't need a nametag for you to recognize him. But that's not how it would have been. Instead you're looking at perhaps several hundred people who all look and are dressed pretty much the same. The men in particular – you know the Christ has to be one of them – they all look the same: Short cropped hair, full beard, dun colored tunic, leather sandals on dirty feet. Though he is God incarnate, King of kings and Lord of Lords, he's standing here sweating with everyone else in the hot sun – and you can't tell who he is. You don't know him. You can't know him unless someone points him out and introduces you to him.

This is the second part of John's mission. First he prepares people to receive Jesus by bringing them to tears of sorrow and repentance for their sins, and then he introduces them to the Savior. Ultimately John did this when Jesus stepped forward to be baptized himself, and John said to his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." But even prior to that, John pointed his hearers to know Jesus by baptizing them for the forgiveness of their sins. The point is that they did not have to see Jesus with their eyes to know him and receive his blessing. In John's baptism their sins really were washed away. They were given spiritual rebirth – which necessarily means they were coming into direct contact with Jesus, for there is no forgiveness of sins and no spiritual rebirth apart from Jesus. John was connecting people to the Savior. He was uniting them with Christ in the water, and he was speaking into their hearts God's Word of grace which by the power of the Holy Spirit created faith and trust in

Jesus. John wasn't just talking about the Christ to come; he was actually delivering him to people – and with him the blessings of life and salvation he brings.

And just as John's ministry to bring us to repentance goes on still today through the Church of Christ, so also does John's mission to introduce us to Jesus and connect us to him and his saving grace. And this, sadly, is what so many in the Church simply do not understand. Jesus stands among us, but so many do not know him. They don't realize that he's here. Even when they look right at him, they don't recognize him.

What do I mean? Let me give you a perfect example. If you have E-mail and internet access, the chances are high that you've heard of a relatively new Christmas song that's gone viral (as they say) especially among those who like to listen to contemporary Christian music. Apparently it's all the rage at the moment. The song is entitled *Where's the Line to See Jesus?* It tells the story of a woman in a busy shopping mall who's rushing around trying to get all of her last minute Christmas shopping done. In the central plaza of the mall there is a long line of children waiting to sit in Santa's lap and tell him what they'd like for Christmas. And as she walks by all these impatiently waiting children, one little boy, who is not in the line, tugs at her arm as asks, "Where's the line to see Jesus?" He goes on to explain that Christmas is really about him – and yes, while Santa Claus gives us presents, for us Jesus gave his life.

Now that much is true. And if the purpose of the song is to remind people that Jesus is the reason for the season, well, okay. Most people who celebrate Christmas in this country have forgotten and really don't care about its connection to Christ. For them it's purely a secular holiday, and if this song helps them regain a little focus, that's great. The trouble as I see it though, besides the fact that the song is way too schmaltzy and trite for my taste, is that it's most popular among professing Christians – people who know very well what Christmas is about. And while the title, main thrust, and endlessly repeated refrain keep asking the question, "Where's the line to see Jesus?" the song never answers the question. Why not? Because from the point of view of the person who wrote the song – who is, no doubt, a member of an Evangelical Christian Church of some mainline denomination (or non-denomination) – there is no answer to the question. Because they teach, believe, and confess that Jesus isn't here. He's gone. He's ascended into heaven. And he won't be back until the last day. For them there cannot be a line to see Jesus.

That flies right in the face of what Jesus himself said: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." These people deny it. And to do it, they take Jesus out of the very places he said he would be. Where's that? Baptism, for starters. We've already seen that John connected people to Christ in baptism and conveyed to them faith and the forgiveness of sins. Could it be that Christian baptism today does anything less? Yet that's what they say – that it's only a symbolic washing and a means of showing your submission to Christ. Funny; the Bible never says that. It says those who are baptized are clothed with Christ. It says that they are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It says that in baptism their sins are washed away by Christ. It says that baptism is filled with Christ. Where's the line to see Jesus? Wherever someone is about to be baptized. But sadly, so many do not know it.

Or again, Jesus is found in his Word. He told his disciples, "Who hears you, hears me." But once again, this is denied. No, they say, the Bible's a great book. And sure, it contains the Word of God. But it's like the owner's manual for the world. It's information only. It tells about Jesus; it doesn't actually deliver him or his saving grace. People who think this way get especially upset when they hear a Lutheran pastor like myself proclaiming the words of absolution "as a called and ordained servant of the Word, I announce the grace of God to you

and in the stead and by the command of my Lord, Jesus Christ, I forgive you all yours sins ...” They say, “Where do you get off doing that? Who gave you that authority?” The answer is simple: the same place John got his authority – from Jesus who is in the very Word that’s proclaimed.

And then there’s the Lord’s Supper. Jesus said, “This is my body given for you” and “This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins.” Where’s the line to see Jesus? Right here at the communion rail every time we celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar. But again, so many in the church deny this. It’s only a memorial meal, they’ll say; a symbol of our unity – or something like that. And so it is that looking right at Jesus, they do not know him.

You may know that I meet with some of the area pastors over lunch on Wednesdays. I was rather surprised recently because many of them are planning to cancel Sunday services in two weeks. Why? It’s because Christmas falls on a Sunday this year. And apparently they believe that their congregations will be better served by each family observing their own private customs and traditions – you know, the gift exchanges and fancy meals – rather than coming to the Church to see Jesus in the places and things where he promises to be. It bothered me that on Christmas of all days – the day the Church celebrates the birth of the Savior – some pastors don’t want to give their people Jesus. But having thought about it, it makes sense. Most of them don’t believe that they have Jesus to give. As far as they are concerned, he’s not here. Jesus stands in their midst; but they don’t recognize him.

Now listen: I’m not saying that they aren’t Christian. What I’m saying is that they have an impoverished version of Christianity. They know Jesus – but not nearly as fully and completely as they could. Nor am I saying these things to gloat or to say that we’re somehow better than they are. No. We are the unworthy heirs of vast spiritual riches that have been handed down to us by grace alone. We do not deserve it. I’m saying that we ought to be grateful to God beyond measure for the fullness of the faith that we have received. And I’m cautioning all of us to be careful, because it’s all too easy to forget and take for granted the gifts of God’s mercy in Christ. And when that happens, we too are in danger of not knowing or recognizing Jesus who stands among us.

And that’s why we need the ministry of John the Baptizer to continue among us: both to show us our sin and our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son, and to deliver to us that same Savior, Jesus Christ, in order that we may know him, his blood bought forgiveness, and the peace of God that he brings. May God grant it to us for the sake of his Son. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!