

God's Message of Greater Things to Come
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2017
John 1:6-8, 19-28

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, John 1:6-8, 19-28: ⁶ **A man came, whom God sent, and whose name was John.** ⁷ **He came to testify, that is, to testify about the Light so that through Him everyone might believe.** ⁸ **He was not the Light but came to witness about the Light...**

¹⁹ **This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to him, to ask him, "Who are you?"**

²⁰ **He confessed and did not deny. He confessed: "I am not the Christ."**

²¹ **They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"**

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² **Then they asked him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who have sent us. What do you say about yourself?"**

²³ **John said: "I am 'a voice of one calling out in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord,"" as the prophet Isaiah said."**

²⁴ **They had been sent from the Pharisees.** ²⁵ **They asked him, "Then why are you baptising, if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?"**

²⁶ **John answered them, "I am baptising with water. There is One standing among you whom you do not know, ²⁷ the One who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandal."**

²⁸ **This happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Nostalgia, resignation, and fear. That pretty much sums up how people generally tend to view their lives. How often, in talking about the past, do we hear people long for

“the good old days” or lament that “they don’t make things the way they used to.” When it comes to the present, there’s often a general feeling of resignation. As we look at the world around us and our own situation, many generally respond with the well-worn and fatalistic cliché “it is what it is.” And the future? Frankly, most of us don’t want even to think about it. What’s going to happen in the Middle East? How will the world deal with North Korea? What’s going to happen next in our own country? What kind of world will my children face as they grow up? How will my grandchildren be able to survive in the midst of frightening moral decay?

The Third Sunday in Advent is commonly referred to as “*Rejoice Sunday*,” a reference to the Epistle (1 Thess. 5:16–24: “*Always be joyful! Pray without ceasing!*”) and the Old Testament Reading (Is 61:1-4, 8-11: “*I rejoice greatly in the LORD. Let my soul shout with joy in my God! For He has clothed me with garments of salvation*”). On this Third Sunday in Advent, known for its emphasis on rejoicing, our sermon text for this morning tells us of the work and witness of John the Baptist. In the midst of a people who longed for the glory of their past under rulers like David and Solomon, who resented their present situation of being subdued and ruled by the Romans, and who had grave concerns about their future if things didn’t change, John brings God’s message of greater things to come. His message, as one sent from God, was a message of hope and a promise of greater things to come in the coming Saviour, which would be cause for great rejoicing.

One might think that God would somehow order the politics or the economics of Israel to provide health, wealth, and happiness. If that were the case, perhaps God would send a Saviour to run for public office. But even if He did, that is not going to resolve our most basic need: ***reconciliation with God***.

From the fall into sin by the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, our relationship with God has been broken. Instead of bearing the holy image of God, our human nature is sinful, and our heart brings forth sin and corruption. Jesus once said, “*what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander*,” (Matt. 15:18-19).

You do not have to look far to see how this has had a growing impact on the apparent downward spiral of things in our world. One only has to read the local newspaper to confirm the dreadful effect of sin in our world. Even when our world and our society want to be at their best, even in this current season when perhaps the emphasis is on peace and goodwill, in reality the consequences of sin in the lives of people and

nations are evident everywhere. It would not be difficult to provide so many examples that could fill the whole service time this morning, and still we would only scratch the surface. I would also not be telling you anything you don't already know.

Rather than spending all that time speaking of sin in past and current affairs, let's talk about sin in your life. Now that is uncomfortable! Its effects may be manifested in ill health, loneliness, broken relationships, suffering, or some kind of personal loss. We all experience these things. They may be the result of our own sin or the sin of others or simply the result of life in a sinful and dying world. And on the basis of this broken relationship with God, whether we look at the past, present, or future, there isn't much for which to rejoice. It was that way two thousand years ago, and it's true also today. Is that all there is?

Why doesn't God do something about this? He has. Our sermon text begins with the words, **6 A man came, whom God sent, and whose name was John**. With those words, it would certainly seem that God has done something. In the New Testament, you can read about several "sent" individuals. The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary to announce that she would give birth to Jesus;¹ Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to announce that the kingdom of God was near;² St. Paul tells us that he was sent to preach the Gospel;³ God sends His angel to the apostle John to communicate the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁴

In our sermon text, we are told that God sent John the Baptist. Like so many others, John was sent with divine authority on a divine mission. As you read through the Old Testament, you will see the record of God at work to do something about our human condition. He made a promise to Adam and Eve and to future generations that He would send a Saviour to atone for sin and to rescue us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. Even when the Israelites, the people He chose, were unfaithful to Him, He remained faithful to His promises. He called patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to carry the promise from one generation to another. He sent prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah to prepare people for the coming of the Saviour. At times, He gave very specific information through these prophets about the Saviour to come. He promised, He called, and He sent so that even in the worst of times and situations,

¹ Luke 1:19, 26

² Matthew 10:5-7

³ 1 Corinthians 1:17

⁴ Revelation 1:1

people could see that God was at work, and, as a result of His evident work, they could rejoice that there were greater things to come.

John was sent to “**witness about the Light.**” His message was clear: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” (Mt 3:2). He baptised people in the Jordan River and it was a baptism of repentance. Judging by the crowds that came to be baptised by him, there was a “buzz” about him and his message. Perhaps for some, it was curiosity, because he certainly did appear as a curious figure. He was clothed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵ Whether the people were merely curious or had a heartfelt desire to hear His message - His call to repentance - and to be baptised by Him, the Bible tells us that “*All the land of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem kept coming out to him. They were baptised by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins,*” (Mark 1:5).

The religious leaders, the Pharisees, **sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to him, to ask him, “Who are you?”** Was he the Christ? Was he Elijah? Was he the Prophet, the one like Moses whom God had promised to the children of Israel in the wilderness that he would raise up?⁶ Who was this man who was drawing so much attention? Was he someone who, perhaps, might rally the Jews to overthrow their Roman rulers?

John was not some slick TV evangelist. He wasn’t a polished political activist rallying followers around him for some revolutionary cause to overthrow the government. In fact, everything he did and said was not about him. His message was not to draw attention to himself, but rather to Jesus. Later on, referring to Jesus, John the Baptist said to his own disciples, “*He must increase, but I must decrease,*” (John 3:30). In our text, he tells those who are questioning him, “**I am ‘a voice of one calling out in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord.”** John was sent by God on a divine mission as the forerunner of greater things to come.

John had no purpose beyond bringing a message, being a voice. He was carrying on a ministry for another, for the Lord, gathering audiences in the wilderness near the Jordan River. He was crying out his message to a world that spiritually had become a wilderness made barren by sin and unbelief. In fact, that was the reason he was chosen and sent by God. He was to point people to the One whom God had sent to be our

⁵ Mark 1:6

⁶ Deuteronomy 18:15

Saviour. So one verse following our sermon text, he points to Jesus and identifies Him as “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,*” (v 29).

When you look at John the Baptist, you can’t help but see greater things yet to come, because John points you to Jesus, and when you look at Jesus, you see the true Light of the world!

Each of the four Gospels has an account of John’s ministry and message. In essence, it is a prologue or a foreword to what follows: the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the subsequent proclamation of Jesus as the Saviour of the world. He is the one whom God promised to send in order to redeem fallen mankind. Clearly, in Jesus, God was at work, and He has done something about our sinful condition.

However, in the Gospels, we read of resistance and opposition to Jesus because He didn’t meet the mistaken expectations of people. Those who were politically minded wanted a revolutionary leader to overthrow the Romans. Instead, He tells them, “*My kingdom is not of this world,*” (John 18:36). Many of those who had witnessed the miraculous feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand wanted Him as their “bread king.” Instead, He tells them, “*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst,*” (John 6:35).

Even in our day, people have mistaken expectations regarding Jesus. Some see Jesus as simply an eloquent voice for a better society. Some see Him as a 21st century “bread king” who wants everyone to have worldly wealth and that this wealth is available for the asking. Some also see Him as completely irrelevant and want nothing to do with Him. None of these human expectations has ever come to grips with the most basic problem of all - that because of the sin we inherited and the sin we commit, we are broken and dying people in a broken and dying world.

When, in faith, we look at the One to whom John testified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we can look forward to greater things to come. That which has separated us from God, that which so often brings hurt and pain to human relationships, is forgiven because the Lamb of God, His own Son, took our sinful nature along with all our sins to the cross. There He put them to death by His own suffering and death. John’s Baptism was one of repentance. But there were greater things to come. In our Baptism, we were baptised into Christ’s death so that just as He

was raised from the dead, we have been raised to a newness of life.⁷

How would you summarise your life today? Are you stuck in the fatalistic philosophy of “it is what it is”? Have you lost sight of the wonder of forgiveness, life, and salvation - the greater things we have in our crucified and risen Saviour? Have you forgotten those wonderful promises that, through Christ, God causes “*all things [to] work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose,*” (Rom. 8:28)? Do you look to the future with fear in your heart because of the uncertainties of life and in the world? Do you dread that time when your earthly life will come to an end and you will stand face-to-face before a holy and righteous God?

Let me share with you greater things. To those haunted and bothered by sin, guilt, and shame, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*” (Rom. 8:1). For those who face uncertain times, illness, or even imminent death, God promises “*I will never leave you nor forsake you,*” (Heb. 13:5). In Christ, we have a genuine reason to rejoice *always*.

John the Baptist, as the forerunner of Christ, proclaimed a message of repentance and urged the people to prepare for the imminent coming of the promised Saviour. No matter what people were going through or what they had to endure, there was a sense that greater things were to come because the promise of the Messiah was about to be fulfilled. So it is with us today as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament and as we eagerly await His second coming. “*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him’ - these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit,*” (1 Cor. 2:9-10).

Today, as we rejoice at what God has done and at the greater things to come, my prayer for you is taken from this morning’s Epistle: “*May the God of peace Himself make you completely holy, and may your spirit, soul and body, be preserved sound and without blame when our Lord Jesus Christ comes! The One who calls you is faithful, and He will also do it,*” (1 Thess. 5:23-24). Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

O God, Shepherd of Your people, You have led Your flock in mercy throughout long years of promise. You have sustained them, and given them hope through Your Son

⁷ Romans 6:4

Jesus Christ. Give us all steadfast faith in Your mercy, that we may rejoice and give thanks each passing day, and be ready for Jesus' second coming.

In Your presence, we offer You our prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving. Forgive us our sins and wipe out our many transgressions. By Your Holy Spirit renew us with Your gracious gifts.

Open the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. Guide those who are lame and stumbling. Heal those who are diseased in their thoughts, words, and deeds. Lead all people to believe in Him whom You have sent, and to follow the things that are good, true, and lasting, and pleasing to Your Son Jesus Christ.

We pray for Your Church throughout the world. Bless all who preach and teach Your Word, that many more may come to know You as the only true God and Saviour of mankind. Rule over the hearts of all people. Guide the decisions of those in authority, and sit in the councils of the nations, that peace and justice may prevail everywhere.

Bless all who have gathered here today in Your house. Be with those of our congregation who are sick or afflicted in any way in body, mind, or spirit. Grant that in their trials they may learn of Your gracious power, and of Your readiness to help in every time of need.

Pour out Your grace on us all, that we may be enabled each day to show forth the glory of Your name, and to witness to Your saving truth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Give us these things, and whatever else You know we need, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

¹ "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to tell good news to poor people. He has sent Me to bandage up broken-hearted people, to announce freedom to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, ² to announce the year of the favour of the LORD, and the day of the vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ to provide for those who grieve in Zion, to give them a splendid head-dress instead of ashes, the

oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called 'The Oaks of Righteousness, which the LORD has planted, so that He may get glory for Himself.'"

⁴ They will build up the ancient ruins. They will raise up the former devastated places. They will repair the ruined cities, which have been devastated for many generations....

⁸ "For I, the LORD, love justice. I hate robbery and injustice. I shall faithfully

reward their work, and I shall make an everlasting Covenant with them.”

⁹ Their offspring will be known among the nations, and their descendants among the peoples. All who see them will recognise that they are offspring whom the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰ I rejoice greatly in the LORD. Let my soul shout with joy in my God! For He has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness, like a bridegroom who puts on a splendid head-dress, such as a priest wears, and like a bride who decorates herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For, as the ground makes its sprouts come up, and, as a garden causes its seedlings to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶ Always be joyful! ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing! ¹⁸ Give thanks in everything! For this is what God wants for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the fire of the Spirit! ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything! Cling to what is good! ²² Keep away from every form of evil!

²³ May the God of peace Himself make you completely holy, and may your spirit, soul and body, be preserved sound and without blame when our Lord Jesus Christ comes! ²⁴ The One who calls you is faithful, and He will also do it.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ A man came, whom God sent, and whose name was John. ⁷ He came to testify, that is, to testify about the Light so that through Him everyone might believe. ⁸ He was not the Light but came to witness about the Light...

¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to him, to ask him, “Who are you?”

²⁰ He confessed and did not deny. He confessed: “I am not the Christ.”

²¹ They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²² Then they asked him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who have sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John said: “I am ‘a voice of one calling out in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord,”’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴ They had been sent from the Pharisees.

²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptising, if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”

²⁶ John answered them, “I am baptising with water. There is One standing among you whom you do not know, ²⁷ the One who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandal.”

²⁸ This happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.