

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Advent, December 14, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 64, 10:3-4, 59, 66, 644.

Lessons: Malachi 3:17-4:6, James 5:7-11, John 1:19-37.

Sermon Text: Matthew 11:2-11.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last Sunday we talked about John the Baptist and how his preaching prepared people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. Today we look at how John teaches his disciples that Jesus is the one they should really be following. We consider

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- 1. Jesus was anointed as the Christ, the Messiah.**
- 2. Jesus tells John's disciples to report what they see and hear.**
- 3. We – and John – find hope in Jesus' message.**

John wanted to prove to his disciples that Jesus was the Christ. You know that the Scriptures give these two names to the Son of God come to earth: Jesus, and Christ, or more formally, "the Christ".

Jesus is his personal name, which means "Savior". Joseph, who was given the responsibility to serve as his earthly father was told that Mary, his betrothed wife, "*will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" (Matt. 1:21)

The New Testament word Christ means the same as the Old Testament word Messiah. The names "Messiah" and "Christ" mean "the Anointed One". The Old Testament word is translated more often "anointed" than "Messiah". And "anointed" is exactly what Jesus was. To anoint means first of all to pour oil, usually sweet-smelling or spiced oil, upon the head, and we are speaking of a sacred or official anointing. Among the Jews, this kind of anointing was conferred on prophets, priests, and kings. Aaron is the first one anointed in the scriptures, anointed as the priest chosen by God, and his sons were also to be anointed as priests. Anointing was a formal and usually public ceremony to designate someone for his special work.

The closest parallels we might have today could be the kind of inauguration ceremony with which we install a president or a governor, or especially the way another nation would celebrate the coronation of a new king. In a more personal sense, and much more important to us, we might speak of a public Lutheran confirmation ceremony as a similar activity, one in which someone, after instruction and preparation, promises to remain faithful to God and then the pastor lays his hand upon the person's head with a blessing.

Jesus, the one we call "the Christ", and "the Messiah" was anointed: appointed, designated in a public way. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit who came down and rested upon him. This happened when John, the one we call "John the Baptist", baptized him. He then began his public ministry. At that time he began his public service as our prophet, great high priest, and our king.

By preaching, teaching, healing, reaching out and training his followers, Jesus proclaims and announces the coming of God's rule. Right now he rules in the hearts of believers. In heaven after he comes to judge the living and the dead, all things in the entire eternal life of all believers will be under his direct rule for their benefit and everlasting blessing.

Jesus was formally designated as the great high priest, the great prophet, and the great king. Yes, but there's more than that. He's not just sitting on a throne in a palace somewhere or in an office somewhere. He's a working king, not a show or figurehead king. He's a priest who had a very important sacrifice to make and who continues to intercede for us at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He's a working prophet. He sees to it that his Word is proclaimed by men. He's a prophet who is called "The Word" in scripture. He was active in God's creation, because God said, "**Let there be ... and there was**"! (Genesis 1:3) He doesn't just show up in his fancy robes for one or two special services a year, like the human high priest of the Jews, but was active every day of his life, and then he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for all sins of all mankind, and he is active even every day of our lives, interceding at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

We read elsewhere in Matthew's gospel: "**Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'**" Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet." (Matthew 14:3-5)

In our text we read "**When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'**"

John knew the answer. He sent his disciples so they could find out for themselves. And we cannot ignore the fact that in prison, John himself probably needed some encouragement and comfort. "**Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.'**" He said 'look at what is happening.' He did not just say, 'Yes, I am the promised Messiah.' He pointed instead to his mighty works: giving sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, curing lepers, making the deaf hear, and even raising the dead. These were not only mighty works that demonstrated Jesus' divine power. They were also the very works that Isaiah the prophet had foretold of the Messiah. Isaiah had also promised that the poor in spirit would be evangelized. Jesus had begun his most famous sermon by declaring, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 5:3). These are the works of the Christ that the followers of John should report back to him in prison.

Then Jesus said "**Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.**" John the Baptist in prison was surely attacked mentally and spiritually by Satan, and may have been in danger of losing his faith, just as we are when Satan attacks us in an especially vicious way. After all, he had been thrown into prison for his preaching of the truth of God. Jesus reminded all of his hearers of the blessings in store for anyone who would remain faithful unto death – the crown of everlasting life! Blessed is everyone who does not fall away from Jesus! He came humbly, he died like a criminal, but he is still the very Son of God and our Savior from all our sins. With this reminder of that goal, John would receive encouragement to persevere.

Before John's disciples were out of earshot, Jesus immediately addressed the assembled crowd with words that would also reassure those disciples. Jesus reminds them that John was a prophet; that he was a forerunner, a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior.

"**As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'**"

Jesus reminded the people of John's ministry and how they had responded to it. Usually prophets would have to go where the people were if they were to be heard. In John's case, the people flocked out to him, even though he was out in the wilderness along the Jordan River. If his message had been like the reeds along the riverbank that would sway back and forth in every breeze, not many would have bothered to go and hear him. If he had changed his message just to please his hearers, he would not have been preaching God's words. If he had worn luxurious clothing, instead of camel's hair and leather, he would have been regarded as just another figurehead of the corrupt Jewish leaders, and he would have received nothing from the people but their

contempt. He did not use his influence, as he might easily have done, in his own interest and for his own benefit. That is the privilege of those that live in kings' houses. John lived a hard life. But refinement, luxury, a life of ease is not the object of the true servant of God. John was a prophet, a true servant of God and more. All the Old Testament prophets pointed far into the future and told of a Messiah whose coming was still afar off. But John was the prophet pointing to the One who was already standing in the midst of the people. John was the second great Elijah, whose life-work consisted in preparing the way for the Lord. Malachi writes of him: **“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.**” (Malachi 3:1) He was the messenger whose message was to prepare the hearts of men for the Savior. The people had recognized him as a prophet, a messenger of God, even if they did not always like what he had to say to them.

Yes, John was a very special prophet. He was a prophet who had himself been prophesied about by both Isaiah and then by Malachi in the very last words of the Old Testament. **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”** (Malachi 4:5-6)

John was the prophet who bridged the gap between the Old Testament and the New. Unlike all the Old Testament prophets, who could speak only of a Messiah who would appear at some unknown time in the distant future, John had prepared the way for the Savior who would come immediately. He was Jesus' immediate advance man and forerunner, and he pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. When Jesus was ready to begin his public ministry, John had the honor of baptizing him. For reasons such as these, Jesus spoke of John as the greatest of God's prophets.

But also the least in the kingdom of heaven is great if he or she has faith in Jesus as the only Savior. Jesus went on to point out the great significance of John's ministry for the kingdom of God. With the powerful preaching of John, God's kingdom was moving forward. As people heard John and then also Jesus calling them to repentance, many people, including those considered by others to be the most wicked in their society, were brought to repentance and were coming into God's kingdom.

No wonder Jesus commended John as the greatest of the prophets. He concluded his remarks about John by declaring that John was "the Elijah who was to come." He was not the Old Testament prophet Elijah raised from the dead; he was the second Elijah. He was like Elijah in forcefulness and courage.

An angel of the Lord had told the priest Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would **"go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah"** (Luke 1:17). Now, Jesus says, these prophecies have been fulfilled. John is this second Elijah. Jesus warns that anyone who has ears to hear this message had better pay attention to it. The Savior to whom John pointed is the only Savior sinners will ever have.

The very people to whom Jesus is talking right now have the One who will be the fulfillment of the prophecy, Christ crucified and resurrected, before their eyes. They have a still more perfect revelation than John.

So what is John's significance for us? In the early pages of the New Testament, we hear and read of this contemporary of Jesus who was sent by God to point to Jesus as the Savior. We learn from John that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. In fact, we read in John's gospel: **"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29)

And so, as we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Christ, how do we prepare our hearts? May we also look to him as the Christ, the one who was anointed as the lamb that is sacrificed to take our sins away. Amen.