

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday after Epiphany, January 10, 2010

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Hymns: 328, 58:7, 63: 1-4, 272, 63:5.

Lessons: Isaiah 40: 1-11, 2 Acts 10: 34-40, Matthew 3: 1-17.

Text: Luke 3: 1-22.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

We often hear about John the Baptist in the Advent season, as we prepare for the coming of Christ. But John's work was carried out after the birth of Jesus Christ, and really, just before Jesus, at about age 30, started his public ministry. Mark tells us *"It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'-- 'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" Mark 1:2-4. John was not the Messiah, the Son of God. He was simply a messenger, one who was to prepare the way, just as many prophets sent by God were to prepare people's hearts for God's grace to come into them in faith that leads to eternal life. Today let's remember

JOHN THE BAPTIST

- 1. His person, and**
- 2. His message.**
- 3. He plainly pointed to Jesus Christ, the Savior from all sins.**

In our gospel lesson today you heard that *"John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey."* Matthew 3:4. Luke identifies him as a real man at a real time in history. He was a strange character. He wore rough clothing, woven of camel's hair. His diet was typical of what one would eat when living in a desert wilderness: locusts and wild honey. He was like Elijah. 2 Kings 1:8 describes the first Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, as *"a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist."* Near the end of John's life, when he was in prison, Matthew in chapter 11 reports that John sent his disciples to Jesus so they could see and hear for themselves that Jesus was truly the Messiah. We read: *"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. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."* Matthew 11:7-14. In this way Jesus himself called John the Elijah who was to come to prepare his way.

When John began his work in the desert region near the Jordan river, the similarity between him and the Old Testament prophet Elijah was not lost on the whole Judean countryside and Scripture says that all the people of Jerusalem came out to hear him. The twenty-mile journey was a difficult one, downhill from Jerusalem and uphill on the way back. But it took them away from their normal daily routines. Surely some came because they sensed the power of God in John. They were excited. After all, it had been 400 years since a

legitimate prophet had appeared on the scene. They had to find out about him, and they did. And of course, some simply came out of curiosity, particularly the religious leaders of the Jews who feared any challenge to their position of power and authority.

Mark quotes Malachi *"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. Our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah points to John. Isaiah was the prophet who spoke about the coming Savior in greater detail than any other Old Testament prophet. It is his words that cause us to understand the words of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, in their messianic sense, that is, in the sense that they point to and speak of the Messiah. These Old Testament prophecies make clear that it was God who sent John the Baptist as his messenger to announce the coming of his Son. In this way John prepared the hearts of God's people to receive him.

When John the Baptist came, those who saw and heard him could draw only one conclusion, namely, that with the appearance of John the promised Messiah would also soon appear. Comparing prophecy and fulfillment, we have no doubts that the one who followed John the Baptist was indeed the promised Messiah. John was God's messenger, God's voice. He did not proclaim his own wisdom, but God's wisdom.

John the Baptist *"came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* Why? Because the hearts of the people had become a desert region, and they needed to be rescued. What he offered them in this baptism of repentance was not merely a ritual washing, but the gift of forgiveness. His baptism was essentially no different from the baptism by which our Lord comes to us today with his pardon and peace. The forgiveness granted through John's baptism was not a reward because they had repented, but a wonderful gift of God who through John's preaching brought them to repentance and gave them a change of heart. Luke said John preached to the crowds, and Matthew makes it clear that it included the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

What was the message of the Pharisees? Law. That is, "do this, be good people". They looked at the law as a record of the good things they had done, not as a mirror to show them their sinfulness. Thus John's preaching repentance was indeed a new message: Repent, because the law shows your sinfulness!

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, and John preached the forgiveness of sins so that God could give the gift of eternal life.

We read in Matthew 5:3-12: *"People went out to [John] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'"*

John preached the law, and the law made them feel like sinners, not like good, righteous people. This is the God-pleasing use of the law as a mirror that shows us our sinfulness. Pharisees and Sadducees felt they were morally superior to others because they felt that they obeyed the law. For such people, the law is a witness to what they perceive as their own goodness. John, however, came *"preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* John called them snakes, no doubt a reference to Satan, the father of lies and wickedness.

He demanded that they themselves must bring forth fruits in keeping with righteousness. The meaning is this: Do not trust in your religious ancestry, however good it may be. You must personally have a right relation with God. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees. Just as unproductive trees are cut down, so the unfruitful nation of Israel could expect judgment, just as any unfruitful human can expect God's eternal judgment.

The Pharisees and Sadducees who came to hear John the Baptist preach came with arrogance. They did not feel they were sinners who had to repent. John warned that like trees and vineyards destroyed for the lack of good fruit, the process was at work, already cutting them off from God's promise. From stones God can raise up new children of Abraham to share eternal life. Only true repentance and faith in Jesus' sufferings and death guarantees the blessings of heaven.

John did not claim to be what he was not. He was not the Christ, and he set the record straight when he said, ***"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."*** A slave, a servant, was one who would humble himself to untie one's sandals, so that someone more important than he could wash the feet, in a dry, dusty land where washing a visitor's feet was a picture of honoring him. In Jesus' presence John the forerunner did not even consider himself worthy to render the service of a slave.

Note also the comparison: ***"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*** Shortly before his ascension into heaven, Jesus explained John's words. In Acts 1:5 Jesus said, ***"For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*** Thus the words of John referred to the day of Pentecost, when the church would indeed experience the power of the Holy Spirit. In the months before Pentecost, people had turned away from Christ. On Pentecost after Peter proclaimed Christ, and we read: ***"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day"*** Acts 2:41.

But all this depended on something else, something that had to come first, and that is our Lord's work of redemption. It is only because of that, that John's baptism brought forgiveness of sins and that God today deals with us in the same way in Word and sacrament. Without Christ this could never be accomplished. That's why John was sent — to prepare the people to receive Christ. John's coming assures us that this Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is our Savior. John is one who proves that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John the Baptist is part of the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

John knew very clearly that Jesus was the Son of God come to take away all the sin of the whole world. John knew very clearly that he himself was only preparing the way for the Messiah. In John 1:29 we read: ***"John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"*** (NIV) ***"Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."*** (KJV)

John's words are to prepare our hearts, too: Repent! Turn from your sins and believe! Jesus came to take your sins away! The evangelist John clearly tells us in John 1:34: ***"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*** Only God in his undeserved love and mercy could take our sins away and only by sending his Son to be punished and so to redeem us.

Believe this! Doubt not! John came to prepare the way for the Savior! That is the same Savior I tell you about today! Believe! Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away your sins! Rejoice for that reason!

"Sin's debt, that fearful burden, Let not your souls distress;
Your guilt the Lord will pardon And cover by His grace.
He comes, for men procuring The peace of sin forgiven,
For all God's sons securing Their heritage in heaven." Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal, 58:7)