

Dec. 13, 2020

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our text from John Chapter 2, where we encounter John the Baptist.

(The Pharisees) asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

So far the text.

I wish I could find the pictures to show you of the beautiful windows at St. John Lutheran Church in Garfield Heights in Cleveland. The artwork is solidly rooted in the 1960's style of Conrad Pickel, which makes them seem rather dated, but the imagery is amazing. The chancel is rounded, and the five windows face west. The center window features Jesus on the cross but placed in such a way that he is both *corpus Christi*, that is the body of Jesus nailed to the cross in crucifixion. and *Christus victor*, the risen Christ triumphant over the cross. The nails in his hands look like glowing coals. His face is half in agony and half in peaceful resolve. One hand is clenched in pain, fingers bend inwards. The other is open in a gesture of peace or perhaps blessing. There are many figures gathered around him, including Mary, his mother at the foot of cross on the side of his sacrifice. She looks up at him with eyes filled with pain and pity. But on the opposite side stands John the Baptist, holding an open Bible in one hand while he points up to Jesus with the other. His finger is directed to the Victorious Christ. And he looks out of the window directly at us. All the other faces in the window are focused on Jesus. But St. John holds the word of God, pointing to Jesus and looks intently at each of us. That is John's job.... His role. His purpose is to point us to Jesus. While I've never been a huge fan of Conrad Pickel's artistic style, I can't fault him for his imagery. I greatly appreciate the message in his work. And especially in the widows of this church. Well done. Because that is indeed John's role. To POINT us to the Christ.

Now, I'm going to admit to being annoyed in years past, that the readings in Advent spend so much time focused on John... when even St. John would have us focus on Jesus. It was never a fully formed thought in my head, before, but my half-baked thinking was running along the lines of “What do we even need John? It's not about John, it's about Jesus.” But that thought came fully formed into my head a few weeks ago, and because I'm a bit of a contrarian, I started to push back on it, thinking. “No, you're wrong. John is actually necessary... I think.” Certainly, John's presence lends even more credence to who Jesus is. Because not only do all the prophecies have to be fulfilled in Jesus, but on top of all that, there needs to be a herald of his coming too. So that in addition to Jesus needing to be born into the right set of circumstances... announced by angels, born of a virgin, a son of David, preceded by a star, born in Bethlehem, received as a king, called Emmanuel, and named Yeshua (Jesus is the Greek version of his name). A Nazarene yet called out of Egypt and etcetera and so forth...

But you have to have a John born that also fits the proper criteria. There are prophecies around his birth, as well. And when you combine the two, it boggles the mind that all of these things have to line up. To the skeptics I say go ahead and deny that Jesus is the Christ if you want to... but the evidence in favor of Jesus being the Messiah, come to save us, should shake a skeptic.

And that's just what we have here, right? The Pharisees once again, asking the devil's question: "Did God really say?" They come out to the desert, to the Jordan, to investigate. Who IS this JOHN fellow? And why is he out here in the middle of nowhere BAPTISING people? Makes no sense.

"Are you the Christ?" they ask him.
John says somewhat emphatically... No. I am not the Christ.

"Then possibly you are Elijah?"
Since the prophet Malachi they have been awaiting the return of Elijah to herald the great and terrible day of the Lord. The harbinger of the Messiah. They are not far off... Jesus will confirm for us that John is the spiritual successor to Elijah and MUST come and in fact already has... in JOHN. The Pharisees are asking if John is the reincarnation of Elijah come again to his people. John is terse in his answer. I am NOT.

"Then you must be 'THAT PROPHET'?"
We might ask, which prophet is that? You mean THE Prophet, which would mean the Messiah again, but no, they mean "that prophet" like unto Moses... which we would say again... You mean the Christ, then... He who is prophet, priest and king? Which takes us back to the Messiah as far as we are concerned but not as far as the Pharisees are concerned. It's the same kind of mistake that will mislead them about the birthplace of the Messiah. The Magi are more informed than the King's advisors. They have the information; they know where to find it quickly. But they have long forgotten the significance of it. And even there... we have one more clue.... "For born unto you this day in the City of David is the Savior Christ the Lord..." The ducks are all lining up, but no one is paying attention.

"Are You THAT Prophet?"
NO.

Have you noticed that John's answers are getting shorter and shorter... and I suppose that matches his patience with them.

I have two "wonders" in this reading...

1. Are the Pharisees grilling John this way, because they are looking for grounds to oppose him?

2. OR because they are looking for a sign to welcome him? Kind of like a job interview. We want YOU to be our Messiah... But in either case, John isn't taking the bait. He's not pleased with them anyway. He calls them a brood of vipers, and demands to know who warned them to flee the coming wrath, John doesn't suffer fools lightly.

Even so, I don't think John has the whole picture of who the lamb of God IS who takes away the sin of the world, I've always had the impression that John was expecting the divine hammer to fall under Jesus' administration. The wrath of God on that great and terrible day of the LORD. I'm pretty sure John isn't expecting the cross when he looks at Jesus. I see indications of this at Jesus' baptism and when John sends his disciples to ask if he IS the One? I'm OK with John being skeptical. It doesn't threaten my faith and it shouldn't threaten yours. Listen to what John says to the Pharisees when they push him to give them an answer when they demand to know who he thinks he is.

You know, like the Devil, they seem to tempt John into claiming a role for Himself...

You could be the Messiah?

NO.

You could be Elijah?

No.

You could be the prophet?

No....

Then who are you?

Who do you think you are... say you are?

John says only that he is a VOICE... Jesus is the Word... John is the voice... In what ways could we imitate John? John was humble; he didn't desire to be more than a voice. John's role was to point us to Jesus. That's our role too. John's humility played out in acceptance. He told his disciples in one of the more difficult times in his ministry that Jesus must increase, and he must decrease. John was the last prophet under the law; the gospel has come, and it is the blessing of Grace.

Rejoice... The Savior is come. Amen