

Greater Things to Come

John 1: 19-28

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They 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." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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 people generally respond with the well-worn and fatalistic cliché "it is what it is." And the future? Most of us don't want even to think about it. Who knows what's going to happen in North Korea with its nuclear arsenal? With the economy being what it is, will I have a job next year? 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?

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, and people who resented their present situation of being subdued and ruled by the Romans, who had grave concerns about their future if things didn't change, John

brings God's message of greater things to come. His message, sent from God, was a message of hope and a promise of greater things to come in the coming Savior, 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 for all. If that were the case, perhaps God would send a Savior to run for public office.

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 hearts produces sin and corruption.

One does not have to look far to see how this has had a growing impact on the downward spiral of things in our world. A quick skim of the local newspaper will 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 we hear so much talk about 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 many examples that we would 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 seen in sickness, weakness, loneliness, broken relationships, suffering, or 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.

Why doesn't God do something about this? He has. Our sermon text begins with the words, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (v 6). With those words, it would certainly seem that God has done something. In the New Testament, you can read about a number of "sent" individuals. The angel Gabriel was sent

to Mary to announce that she would give birth to Jesus; Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to announce that the kingdom of God was near; St. Paul tells us that he was sent to preach the Gospel; God sends his angel to the apostle John to communicate the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1).

John was sent to “bear witness about the light.” His message was clear: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. He baptized people in the Jordan River and it was a Baptism for repentance. Judging by the crowds that came to be baptized by him, there was a “buzz” about him and his message. The religious leaders, the Pharisees, sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him who he was. Was he the Christ? Was he Elijah? Was he a Prophet, like Moses whom God had promised to the children of Israel in the wilderness that he would raise up? Who was this man who was drawing so much attention? Was he someone who, perhaps, might just 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” (Jn 3:30). In our text, he tells those who are questioning him, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ ” (v 23). John was sent by God on a divine mission as the forerunner of greater things to come.

John's entire ministry and message were filled with the promise of greater things to come. 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 Savior. He points to Jesus and identifies him as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”.

When you look at John the Baptist, you can't help but see greater things yet to come, because he will point you to Jesus, and when you look at Jesus, you see the true light of the world!

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”. 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”.

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. What has separated us from God, what 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 baptized into Christ's death so that just as he was raised from the dead, we have been raised to a newness of life.

Permit me to share some 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”. For those who face uncertain times, illness, or even imminent death, God promises “I will never leave you nor forsake you”. 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 Savior. 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.”

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