

SERMON 902

December 14, 2014

The Third Sunday of Advent

976th Week as Priest

803rd Week at St Dunstan's

68th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



JOHN THE BAPTIST

*Grace to you, and peace, from God
our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
AMEN.*

John the Baptist is one of the strangest characters in all of the sacred stories. He reminds me of Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest who visited Abraham in the Book of Exodus; or Samuel, the boy who became the last judge and the first prophet in the times of the Great Kings of Israel.

John comes out of the wilderness in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, preaching a gospel of repentance. He has a wild look in his eye, and he wears the skins of animals. Martin Bell used to say, “John is a wild-eyed, half-crazy, sideways-walking man of God.” John is the one who screams at the scribes and Pharisees, “Woe to you hypocrites, you

brood of vipers!” As soon as John appears, people from throughout Judea and all the people of Jerusalem come to the River Jordan to see and hear what the Baptist is doing. And what he is doing is *baptizing thousands of people*. Men and women, boys and girls, old people, babies. They are all rushing to the river to repent and be born again. John baptizes whole families at a time. He is in a terrible hurry, for he knows that his time is short.

Very seldom do we see such a dramatic personage come on the biblical scene, do his holy work, and disappear almost as suddenly as he arrives.

John is a prophet—just as Samuel, and Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos were prophets. His words are not his own; they are the words of God placed in his mouth. His mission is clear and immediate, and John takes on his work with intensity and passion and purpose. John burns white-hot for a brief while at the advent of the Gospels, and then he is no more.

John, you may remember, is the cousin of Jesus of Nazareth. In Luke’s Gospel we hear the story of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The Virgin Mary visits Elizabeth to tell her of her pregnancy, and Elizabeth’s child John leaps in her womb. These two boys will be born months apart, and their lives will be inextricably bound together in

the rise of Jesus and the fall of John. “He must increase,” says John, “and I must decrease.”

At the River Jordan, Jesus seeks to be baptized by John, but John wants no part of it. “You should baptize me,” explains John. “I am not worthy to untie your sandals.” But Jesus insists, and so he is baptized, and a voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my Son, my Beloved. Listen to him!” It sounds like thunder, and only a few understand what has happened.

This is the classic fullness-of-time moment. Things are never, ever, going to be the same again. John the Baptist has come to Judea, and he is a lightning rod for the Kingdom of God. It all begins right here. John is not the light itself; no, he has come to testify to the light, and the light is the Light of the World, his cousin Jesus.

As it always is with God, there is more than meets the eye in the story of John the Baptist. Jesus will tell his disciples later, after the death of his cousin, that John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets—that he was Elijah, returned from the dead, to announce the coming of the Messiah. This is indeed earth-shaking news! Things are not as they appear! John is the greatest among men, says Jesus. He is not the Messiah, but he is the forerunner. This Elijah, you recall, is the one whose place is prepared and ready for his arrival at

the Passover Seder. This Elijah is the one, the forerunner, who is expected to knock at the door and be greeted by a small child at the Passover. Elijah and John are one and the same.

But neither of them is anything compared to the Messiah, which is an ancient word for the Christ, who is Jesus of Nazareth. “I am nothing compared with him,” says John. “I am only the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and nothing more.”

So tell me, how does the story of this strange man speak to us in our own day, in our own time and circumstance? It is not an easy question to answer.

Perhaps John tells us that some of us are meant to be forerunners, those who announce the coming of someone, or some thing, greater and more important. Maybe John the Baptist shows us that the role of the supporting actor is just as essential to the story as the main character is. Or perhaps we see in John’s brief flash of life that we are—all of us—an essential part of the story of God. We are—each of us—beloved of God’s and held to be of infinite importance.

Long or short, famous or unknown, powerful or helpless, we all have a part to play in the Kingdom of God. We may be known only to Christ himself, but we can be assured that the Messiah knows us better than we know ourselves. **AMEN.**