

## **Trusting God's Promise of True Life**

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor  
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Advent 3, December 13, 2009

Our introduction to John the Baptist continues with concrete advice on how to respond to God's call for repentance. The way to God's heart is clear: turn God's love for us into compassion for others. The crowds asked, "What shall we do?" John makes God's will plain. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and do the same with food." To tax-collectors, laborers, and ordinary citizens, he said that we should do right by our neighbor and be satisfied with what we have. There's nothing so radically new that one might think that a revolution was about to erupt. There's nothing so hard to grasp that a Ph.D. might be required to figure it out. It wasn't rocket science, just common-sense compassion. If you were expecting secret formulas and magical incantations to unlock mysteries hidden for the ages in the deep recesses of the wonders of creation, that's not John the Baptist's point, nor his interest. He just hits you straight between the eyes with common-sense consistency. If your neighbor needs help, and you can help: then help! If your job involves a public trust, then don't betray it! Don't take advantage – whether by cunning or conning, by brute force or behind-the-back deceit. If you want to make it complicated, then the guidance of torah and rabbinic commentary go to great lengths distinguishing between friends, family, neighbors, strangers, and enemies. But that's not John's interest; and as we learn more about Jesus, it's not anything he values either, except to encourage us to love neighbors and strangers alike, extending help to those in need, whether friend or foe.

The Apostle Paul could turn the rhetoric up a notch or two, when he had to, and he almost always had to. There's a great text in Ephesians 1 where Paul loads one lofty phrase upon another in describing the significance of Jesus Christ. "In him we have redemption through his beloved ... the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us ... revealing to us the mystery of God's will with all wisdom and insight ... according to his good pleasure that He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time ... to draw all things to Himself, things in heaven and things on earth." If it is incomprehensible mystery that you want, then there it is in plain English, kind of, albeit complicated syntax and a convoluted style! If you want to know what that means for us, then all you've got to do is read the Second Lesson, where Paul breaks it down to this: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4) What does it mean to follow Jesus? "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is real. He's in our hearts and alive among us. Don't worry about anything; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:5-7)

John the Baptist makes it sound a good deal scarier. "I baptize with mere water; but one who is mightier than I is coming, and he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire! His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with fire, unquenchable fire!" (Luke 3:16-17) As some of you may remember, we just celebrated a baptism several weeks ago; and the church is still here, and so is the baby, Max Kitzmiller. Did we forget the fire? Well, as I recall, I told you

plainly that Lutherans don't use the fiery rhetoric of eternal damnation to frighten God's children into the promise of salvation. We trust the Good News of God's grace to open our hearts and our minds and our lives to the invitation that comes to each of us personally through the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. It's not just a matter of method. It's not just a choice between the carrot or the stick. It's not about whether we can catch more flies with honey or vinegar. We're talking about the truth of God's grace, the faithfulness of God's love, and promise that God is with us, and that God's heartfelt desire is that we choose life and live, that we trust God to honor His word, the Word that entered our world, and our lives, sharing our burdens and bearing our sins in the body that died on the Cross and rose from the grave so that we might know that God is exactly as Jesus has revealed him to be, thoroughly gracious, extravagantly merciful, and abounding with steadfast love. That's what Jesus said in John 10:10. "I've come so that you might have life, and live it abundantly, fully, and forever." That's what Paul is telling us in Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I say, Rejoice!" God is that good. Count on it. It's the truth.

I had the good pleasure recently to visit with Don Achauer at Manor Care. Don has battled with a number of maladies over the course of the past decade, or two. It hasn't held him back, nor gotten him down. But he began to think lately that this latest battle could get the better of him, sooner or later which is, in principle, true. Sooner, or later, death will get the better of us, or, at least, claim to. There's no denying it. We're destined by the flesh and blood of our bodies to die. We've never experienced that great unknown. So, it's hard to know exactly what it is we should think about it. The Scriptures offer a clear path to convictional certainty. Paul tells us that we should be one-hundred percent certain, absolutely persuaded, completely convinced that nothing will ever separate us from the life giving embrace of God's love – not our daily struggles, not our doubts or fears, not even the final foe and ultimate enemy we call death. That's the Good News that's promised and proclaimed with Baptism. As Lutherans, we have embraced the practice of baptizing babies as our norm. But let's be clear, the truths proclaimed with Baptism are not kids stuff. These truths are fully formed adult conclusions about the God we see revealed in the Bible, the God whose love we have come to know our whole lives, the God Jesus proclaimed and embodied in life, in death, and now in us.

None of us has been back from the dead. We've not experienced death in its full frontal finality. These are not things we can know about directly. But the heart and soul of our Lutheran tradition tells us that God is fundamentally and thoroughly gracious. Because of this grace, by the power and promise of this grace, with grace as the interpretive key to knowing God, understanding the Scriptures, and believing the gospel, we stand with Paul in our certainty that nothing in this life, nor the next, nothing we've done, or ever could do, no power of any kind, nothing in the entirety of all of creation can keep God from loving us for all of eternity. That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It's this simple. Believe it, and because it's true, you can entrust your future – and your present – to the God who comes to us in the baby born in Bethlehem, the God who reveals the depth of his love through the cross of Christ, the God who shares His eternal life with us through the power of the Resurrection, which is freely ours as we trust God's grace and live God's love ... in Jesus' name. Amen