

"All About Jesus"
Luke 1:1-22
December 4, 2002
Midweek - Advent 1 B
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

I. The Greatness of John the Baptist

Our story begins about five centuries before tonight's reading, with the last words of the Old Testament. It's not a pretty picture of humanity. Israel has seen Jerusalem and the temple destroyed because of idolatry. They've been carted off into captivity and slavery. Delivered by the Lord, a few of them have returned, rebuilt the city and temple. This is the Lord's doing; they ought to know by now.

But now, already, the prophet Malachi declares that corruption has come once again to the holy place. The hearts of the people are turning. The priests have become lax and immoral. The ceremonies of the temple are no longer holy to God. The number of righteous is dwindling once again. The prophet decries such sins, but still preaches a word of hope: The Savior is coming. "The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple," he prophesies (Mal. 3:1). And just before the Lord appears, one will come to prepare the way. These are the final words of the Old Testament:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

Then the Lord says nothing more for 500 years.

500 years later, a priest enters the temple. He's an elderly man, this Zacharias, chosen by lot to burn incense that day. He sees more than incense: Gabriel, an angel of the Lord appears to Zacharias with startling news:

Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Lk. 1:13-18)

The Lord has been silent to human ears for five centuries, but He picks up His plan right where He left off. As the Old Testament closed, He promised the Savior and a messenger to precede Him. As the New Testament opens, He announces that the messenger is nearly there: He will be the son of old Zacharias and his barren wife, Elizabeth. He will be the miracle-child of their old age. But more than that, he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He will be great in the sight of the Lord. Why? Gabriel says why:

He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.

He will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

How will he do these things? By being the messenger who prepares the way. He will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just by preaching to them a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. We see this if we peek ahead a couple of chapters, when John is full-grown in Luke 3. He warns the children of father Abraham not to trust in their pedigree, but to repent of their sin. He decries the sin of covetousness, telling people to share and help their neighbor. He preaches the law to tax collectors, exhorting them to stop the greed and theft, to repent of their sins and go about their duties honestly. He warns soldiers not to operate with a heavy hand, but to confess such sins and act justly. Thus he makes ready a people prepared for the Lord. Thus he turns the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

And then, he literally turns many to the Lord their God: When the Lord comes to the Jordan to be baptized, John will point the finger and declare, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!"

This is what makes John great in the sight of the Lord: He does not fail to point to Jesus. He is the messenger, not the Messiah; and when the Savior comes, John decreases while Jesus increases.

All this is in the message of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias, when he appears to the old priest in the temple. Zacharias just can't believe it, so the angel sentences him to silence until he can see the promise of John with his own eyes; a priest of God who doubts God's promises simply shouldn't speak.

John will speak, and all Judea will hear. He will prepare the way. He will be great in the sight of the Lord, because he will always point to the Lord.

II. Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus

There's an old joke about children's sermons, and the gist of the punchline is this: As long as the child answers any question with "Jesus," he is probably right. It's sort of an amusing joke; but behind the laugh, there's an important truth. There's a reason why the answer is always Jesus—because Jesus is always the ultimate answer.

You come here tonight after the day, and likely with things on your mind. It could well be health problems that vex you, or financial troubles that leave you anxious. Perhaps it's family matters—a parent who is fading or a child who is misbehaving. Maybe it was a crummy day at work, and the job stress level is high.

So after the long day, you could use a break. You could use some comfort. You could really use some help.

And all you hear about is Jesus.

The devil would have you believe that this means the Church really isn't there to help, that the sermon and the faith is really irrelevant to your life and problems. We beg to differ with the devil. Like John the Baptist, we are called upon to point you to the One who will help; because, ultimately, the answer is Jesus.

Therefore, like John, we preach to turn you from disobedience to the wisdom of the just. Then, we proclaim to you the Good News of Jesus Christ, for He is your help in time of trouble. We don't give you all the answers; but we give you the one answer that will not fail.

What I mean is this: Take the example of health problems that we mentioned before. We cannot promise that we will speak words here that make the illness go away before you depart from the service tonight; we can't make that promise because the Lord doesn't make that promise, and we are only here to repeat His promises. Therefore, we will tell you what He says about illness in His Word. Illness is an outrider of the wages of sin; and because you and I are made of sinful flesh, we will suffer from health problems and, eventually death. Such sickness preaches the law to you far more profoundly than a sermon ever could. We can also tell you of God's gracious providence for this life, how He provides technology, medicines and physicians to assist you in times of illness. But more than that, we point you to Jesus. He is the Great Physician with eternal healing: He has borne your sicknesses and infirmities to the cross and destroyed their power there. They can afflict you for a while, but their days are numbered; in Christ, your days are not. Antibiotics and surgical procedures may bring you back to health for a little while; Christ's body and blood give you immortality. That's why we declare the wages of sin, as evidenced by disease; and that's why we point you to Jesus, who forgives you all of your sins. When it comes to health and life, Jesus is the final answer.

Or, consider the example of financial anxiety, an unpleasant worry to be sure. We cannot promise that you will have prosperity and wealth in this world, because the Lord doesn't make that promise; and remember, we are only here to be the messenger, to repeat what He has to say. Neither will we give you handy investment tips or suggestions for getting out of debt; that is the vocation of others, and we've no right to step on their turf. We will preach warnings from the law about such sins as wastefulness, sloth, greed, and discontent; such sins are at the root of many financial troubles. Even then, though, we don't preach this law primarily to get you out of debt. We preach it to bring sin into the light, to prepare the way and show you your need for the Savior. He has been humble, selfless, giving and content with His lot for you-even to death on the cross for your sins. And even if you squander much of what the Lord gives you for this life, He still provides for you for the sake of Jesus. In the end, Jesus is the final answer.

Consider the concerns of family, the disobedient child or the parent who is slowly fading. Once again, it is not our place to give you detailed analyses of child psychology or the physiology of old age; the Lord blesses this world with plenty of experts in these areas. We can tell you that childish misbehavior and the deterioration of old age are both results of sin, proof that things in this world don't work as they ought-including our will, our mind and our bodies. We can also tell you that, as a family member, you have the privileged vocation of serving those in need-be that by exercising discipline or helping with everyday tasks. And most of all, we will proclaim to you the Savior Jesus. He is the Savior who has defeated sin and death. He is the One who cleanses us in Holy Baptism and makes us His children. He is the ultimate hope of the disobedient child, because He promises faithfulness to His baptized people despite their sinful rebellions. He is the ultimate hope of the aged

and fading; even if we cannot remember our name, He does. He has written it in His book of life. He is the ultimate hope. He is the ultimate answer.

Or, finally, we mentioned job stress as an example. The Lord provides no advice on office politics or management dynamics, though some have tried to twist the Scriptures into such counsel. He does, however, declare the law of man's sinfulness and lack of love for his neighbor. Therefore, we will preach to you this truth, and warn you that such a lack of love is always tempting as you try to get ahead yourself. We can also preach to you that you work where you work because God has placed you there to serve; thus you do so with His blessing. But most of all, we proclaim this: Christ has died in the ultimate love of, and service to, His neighbor-yourself included. He takes away your sins. He sets you free from them and free to forgive others, lest you become a slave to sin and fail to serve your neighbor in the workplace. Furthermore, for the sake of Christ, God continues to provide for you through your employment. Here, again, the ultimate answer is Jesus.

Do you see? When you come here, you hear about Jesus only for a reason. We do not claim to know everything; in fact, the Lord requires that we speak only one message: The death of His Son for the forgiveness of our sins. Ultimately, He is the answer. The greatest danger in all the troubles of life is that they would lead you to despair and reject the Lord; the Lord has thus died to thwart this greatest danger, promising that He will deliver you from these troubles to life everlasting. In the meantime, He still provides for you and for all the world-why? Because He has redeemed all the world-His care for you, here and now in trouble, begins at the cross. And as you face those many troubles, you do so with the confidence that God is not out to get you; you can be certain of this because His Son has died to remove your sin. There is nothing for God to hold against you, because all has been forgiven.

So you come here, and you hear about Jesus. You confess your sins and receive forgiveness. You depart from here still facing burdens in this life; but you do so with the confidence that the greater burden of sin and death has been borne for you by Christ to the cross. Therefore, you depart strengthened in faith, and with the hope of life everlasting. You do so because the Lord is with you. Of this you are sure, because in every trial and trouble He declares this ultimate answer to you: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen