

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**Third Sunday in Advent (2020)**

**We Look for the Lamb of God**

**Rev. Toby Byrd**

***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3, ESV)***

I find it deeply disturbing when people confessing to be followers of Christ Jesus, say to me, “Pastor, I hope I’m good enough to get into heaven.” When people are concerned that they haven’t done enough, or that they aren’t good enough or don’t believe enough to get into heaven, this shows a complete lack of an understanding of the Gospel. It shows a lack of understanding of God’s work in Baptism. In those blessed waters God made them a child of His, forgave their sins and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who, in turn, gave them the gift of faith to believe in Jesus, as He began His work of sanctification in their lives. Doubt such as this fails to understand the value of the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus whose death upon the Altar of the Cross rescued all mankind from sin, death, and the devil. Our Lord’s death overcame the consequence of sin, not the effort of men. So, if you claim to be a true believer in the life-saving death of Jesus you should know it is beyond your capability to gain eternal life. Jesus already earned eternity for you on the Altar of the Cross. So if you doubt your salvation, thinking you aren’t good enough because you haven’t done enough, you aren’t doubting yourself but rather you are doubting the work of salvation accomplished for you by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You are calling His work insufficient while trying to replace it with your own. If this is true, then you are looking to for salvation in the wrong place, a place where it cannot be found. Scripture tells you plainly that salvation is found only in Jesus, saying, ***“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12, ESV)***

Doubting one’s salvation is distrusting God’s Word and it’s one of Satan’s favorite tools. Doubt caused Eve to eat from the tree God had commanded she not eat, and sin entered the world. In the Gospel Reading for today, some say they find doubt in John the Baptizer, insisting that he doubts whether Jesus is the prophesied Messiah. But I would suggest that nothing could be further from the truth.

The life of John is important to the story of salvation. It begins when God sends the angel Gabriel to his father announcing John’s birth. Gabriel said, ***“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been 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 before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” (Luke 1:13–15, ESV)*** Like Abraham, Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were old and without child. Yet God, fulfilling His plan of salvation, gave Zechariah a son. A son who would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of his conception. A son who in his mother’s womb leapt with joy at the nearness of the Christ. John, the son of Zechariah, was brought forth to fulfill the prophecy of Malachi; ***“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me,”*** and ***“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” (Malachi 3:1; 4:5, ESV)*** Jesus verifies this truth, saying, ***“This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’” (Matthew 11:10, ESV)*** ***“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” (Matthew 11:13–14, ESV)***

Scripture makes it clear, there is no question, John is the forerunner of the Christ. He was chosen by God to baptize His Son in the River Jordan and to proclaim Him, ***“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)***. Fulfilling his calling, John came into the world preparing the way of the Lord, proclaiming repentance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, proclaiming that God has come to purge His creation of sin and evil, He has come to destroy immorality and idolatry. He has come to reign over His Creation, and He has come to fulfill His promise to make all things new. Knowing this, are we to believe that because others doubt that somehow John the Baptizer is doubting whether Jesus is the Son of God. I don't think so!

There is no question that when John was unshackled, he fulfilled his calling. He preached repentance and baptized at the River Jordan and He rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for their works righteous teachings. But here in Matthew's Gospel, we find John languishing in one of Herod's miserable prisons awaiting an unknown fate. But why is he there? He is there because he filled his calling, to prepare the way, for obeyed the Lord, and for rebuking sinners, which included Herod the tetrarch for sexual immorality with his brother's wife. Sitting in prison, had he now forgotten who he was? Was he so confused that he began to doubt God's call, asking himself, I have done what God led me to do? If so, why am I sitting in prison? Befuddled, was he questioning God's wrath against unrepentant sinners, asking why I am being punished and they're not? Perhaps he was thinking, was I wrong? Was he thinking, why me? Had I not done all that I was born to do? Sitting in that dank dungeon, was he now, as some say, beginning to doubt that Jesus was the One for whom he was to prepare the way? Some contend that after all, John is still a human being subject to all the frailties of humanity, including doubt.

Such thinking is not unusual. After all, are we not all frail human beings, sinners who are subject to doubt and misbelief? When tragedy makes its way into our lives, do we not ask, why? Faced with the loss of a spouse or a child, do we not ask, why? Faced with the tragedy of the international crisis of COVID-19, do we not ask why? And just think of those whose lives are filled with the horror of war, people living with the unspeakable horror of death all around them, do they not also scream out and ask, why? Think of all the immortal souls who face life's tragedies, how do these tragedies affect them? As we do, the first question we must ask is, are they people of faith? Oh, not faith in some man-made god, some idol, for if that is their hope in the depths of tragedy, their truly hopeless because they do not know Jesus. For such as these we pray that our merciful God would shower them with His mercy granting the gift of faith to cling to Jesus. So, too, we pray this same prayer for those who profess faith in Christ Jesus, but who doubt and are uncertain as to His value in times of distress and tragedy.

True believers, those who confess Christ as their Lord and Savior are those who see that death and life's tragedies are a result of sin. They are those who know that there is only one remedy for sin, the blood of our Lord Jesus poured out upon the Altar of the Cross, for only His blood can assuage God's wrath against our sin. Furthermore, disciples of Christ know that their lives are transient; merely a short voyage upon this earth leading to our final port of call; life in heaven with our Lord Jesus and all the saints who have gone before us. Yes, tragedies in this life bring sadness but they do not bring doubt or despair for those who know that life on this earth is only temporary, a prelude to eternity. We are confident of this truth through the faith given us by the Holy Spirit who leads us to believe in our salvation won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God.

But contrary to the faith of some, God did not do this immediately, but mediately through means. God uses the earthly means of water and word, bringing you to faith. Through His called servants. God brought you to faith through hearing the word of the Gospel and through the cleansing power of Baptism, and these savings means were not delivered by stealth, but through

a man. So, too, God used John the Baptizer in the same way for this same purpose. In the wilderness and by the River Jordan, John Baptized and proclaimed the Gospel preparing hearts for Jesus. Now, sitting in his prison cell, John, still focusing on his call, prepares the way for his disciples, sending them to Jesus to ask, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*** (v. 3)

Here is true preaching: directing doubters to go with all their doubt straight to Jesus. What better source for the answers to your spiritual questions than Jesus Himself? However, unlike the days of John, Jesus is no longer among us physically. Given this reality, you might ask, how, today, can the men be directed to Jesus? How can you get your questions answered, your doubts assuaged, or your heart relieved of its load of sin? Well, it’s not as difficult as it might seem. Truth is its quite simple. Jesus wants to be with you; therefore, He invites you to be where He can be found, in house of Word and Sacrament ministry, His holy Church. Here, our Lord Jesus comes to you face-to-face, coming to you through His ordained servant who in His stead pronounces the Lord’s absolution of your sins. He comes to you in His word of the Gospel relieving you of the burden of your sin. He comes to you in the blessed waters of Baptism, cleansing you of sin, adopting you as a child of God, all pouring out His Holy Spirit upon you, giving you the gift of faith, and robing you in His righteousness. And He comes to you at the altar rail where He feeds you His true Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins and the continuous strengthening your faith. So, like the disciples of John, do you also ask, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*** If so, listen to John the Baptizer when he tells you there is no other to look to, for Jesus is ***“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** (John 1:29, ESV)

This blessed season of Advent is all about waiting on the coming of the Lord. As followers of Christ we know that He came at His incarnation and He will come again on the Last Day, but many who call themselves followers of Christ fail to understand that He comes to us every Lord’s day through Word and Sacrament ministry. So we need not wait until Christmas or the Last Day. No! We can be in the presence of Jesus on every Sabbath or Feast Day, He invites us, saying, ***“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*** (Matthew 11:28–30, ESV) Do not turn down the invitation of our Lord Jesus who desires to come and be with us, that He may answer our questions through His blessed and divine Means of Grace.

Here, in His house, He is found among you today, reminding you that, ***“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”*** (John 8:31-32). If John the Baptizer were living today, he would say to you during this Advent season: “If you want to know Jesus, listen to the Word of God. Come to the waters of Baptism and to the altar rail to receive the body and blood of Christ and the forgiveness He promises. In these Means of Grace, you shall see Jesus as He truly is; the Christ Child, the only begotten Son of God, the One whom we adore and worship in this upcoming Christmas season and in every season. He is truly the Messiah, the One for whom John the Baptizer prepared the way. The of whom John the Baptizer proclaimed to be, ***“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** We need look no further. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.