



## In Those Days...

Second Sunday of Advent  
December 4, 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

I got the shock of my life last Wednesday. As is my usual schedule, I am ten minutes behind in my life and was flying into the parking lot at Pick and Save to grab extra bread for our Advent Soup Supper. As I was pulling into the parking lot running through the list in my head, my phone dinged. Being a rule-following driver who never looks at his phone while operating a motor vehicle. I pulled into a spot and reached for my phone only to have someone try to open my passenger side car door which happened to still be locked. In our van, the doors are locked until you shift the car into park. And at the moment the car shifted into park and the doors unlocked – the person tried to open the door again. This time the door opened. The woman began to speak and then looked up. And with a look of utter shock, she stopped dead in her tracks. “You are not my husband,” she said. To which I replied, “you are right, I am not your husband!” (I thought about quoting scripture to her from the woman at the well story – I am not your husband and you have had five husbands before me...but then thought better of it.) She apologized. I smiled and let her gracefully close the car door and continue the search for her husband. Needless to say, my shock wore off quickly – but for one small moment – I stood there utterly speechless as this woman tried to get into my car.

“In those days,” Matthew begins, “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is the one whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, makes his paths straight.’” It is almost impossible to get to Christmas without getting the shock of our lives by John the Baptist in Advent.

Every Advent, we have to go by John the Baptist to get to Jesus. Drawn by the light of one spectacular, bright star, we are heading through the cold blue night, minding our own business when a red glow appears just over the hills ahead. Sparks swirl up into the sky and turn to ash, floating away from the unseen source of heat below. Reaching the top of the hill, we look down and see—John the Baptist—hopping mad, preaching in front of a bonfire with a pitchfork in one hand and an ax in the other. He is the last person in the world most of us want to see.

But there is no getting around John. He is God’s appointed messenger, sent to prepare the way of the coming Lord, and his message is--that the one who is coming is not coming simply to pass out invitations to a Christmas party. He is coming to chop and to burn. He is coming to cut a narrow path through the world, separating the trees that bear good fruit from those that are dead wood and dividing the life-sustaining wheat from the worthless chaff. He is coming to judge the world, in other words. He is coming to determine who is on the side of life and who is not, and to dispatch those who are not--so that he and the good fruit, the good wheat, can get on with the business of feeding a starving world. It is not that Jesus hates the dead wood; it is not that he is out to get them. There is simply no life left in them for the Lord of life to reach, and meanwhile they are in the way. (I do wonder, in this moment, if we are on the same page – I would argue that the dead wood is not the criminal or the broken – but more the self-righteous and the sanctimonious.) So he will cut and sweep and burn, John says, as part of his coming to the world. He will judge between those who are on the way and those who are in the way as he clears his own way through the world, and all of us shall know ourselves for who we are. Happy Advent to you!

The Gospels are unanimous that John the Baptist marks the end of one age and the beginning of another. The waiting is over, 'The day is at hand.' After a 400-year silence from the last word of the prophet Malachi, John the Baptist appears as the first messenger of God in the New Testament and the last of the great prophets. The people of Israel lamented the silence that had existed for so many years. They had been



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without a messenger for too long, some felt, but now rejoiced, and could clearly see in John the Baptist an end to God's silence.

One of the most shocking things about John's vision of judgment is that unquenchable fire of his. It is not possible to live in the western United States without vivid images of forest fires and their devastation. But if you hear the scriptures on Sunday or read your Bible through the week, you have to wonder about that fire. Throughout Scriptures, fire is the one reliable sign of the presence of God. God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush; a pillar of fire guides the people of Israel through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt; when Moses goes up on Mount Sinai to get the Ten Commandments from God, it looks to those down below as if the mountain itself is being devoured by fire. And yet today, this messenger of God offers little grace and even less mercy – John comes with a message from God, “prepare.”

When Matthew tells us the story of John the Baptist, he begins with the words, “in those days.” The same words we will hear on Christmas night when the story is told of a powerful emperor who calls the world to account for his own glory and the glory of the Roman Empire. Funny, that on this day, John the Baptist calls each of us to account for ourselves. “Repent,” John tells us. But John does not stop at that command. John continues with a word of hope-filled salvation the people dared not dreamed to hear. “For the Kingdom of heaven has come near.”

We don't often hear people speak the way Matthew writes. “In those days, I had a full head of hair. In those days I was afraid for my life. In those days, my children listened to me and did what I said. In those days, my husband was alive. In those days, I laughed more than I cried.” I wonder if we would cherish the stories of our lives with greater reverence – if we honored our stories of life and death for what they are – revelations of the kingdom of God coming near to us. That may be the greatest shock of all. That the stories our lives tell are stories revealing when the Kingdom of heaven comes near. There is not one of us – who is unable to tell the story of God coming near to us in the stories of our lives – the shock comes when we tell the story and actually recognize the moment God's presence was revealed to us: in the valley we walked; by the bedside where we kept vigil; in the pain of healing; through the journey of illness; and, as Pastor Tony shared last Sunday, in the certain uncertainty of what will come.

My friends, Matthew writes the story of John the Baptist as a remembrance of what had occurred...“in those days,” Matthew began. We are living the story of our lives, here and now. “In these days,” is how we begin. In these days, God has made the path straight. Though we may find ourselves lost for a time along the way, God still makes the way. In these days of Advent - we begin with hope – we hunger for peace – we revel in joy – we rest in love. In these days God comes to us. God always comes to us. This is the true shock of Advent. That God comes to us.

In these days as we journey through Advent into Christmas. In these days of joy and of judgment. This is the way we prepare for the coming of the Lord. This is Advent with John the Baptist. This is Advent – hope, peace, joy, love. This is the way of the Lord—the royal highway of King and judge. The dirt road of fisherman and crucified. In those days and in these days, this is the Advent of our God, and it is time for us to prepare. Amen.