

"Learn to See What You Are Looking At"

Text: Matthew 3:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

You have often heard it said, "*Seeing is believing.*" Yet the greater truth is undoubtedly that believing is seeing. An ancient proverb of uncertain origin put it this way, "*We do not see things as they are; we see things as we are.*"

Interesting thing about those old generalities – they're generally true. In this case, *absolutely true*. Everything we hear, see, experience is colored by who we are. Two people are walking along a river in the same place and at the same time – one sees natural beauty and one can focus only on the litter. Two fans see the same play and the same call by other officials – the one whose team is penalized sees the call as terrible, the other sees it as right and justified. This fact of humanity is proved nowhere more clearly than during an election cycle. Two people hear or see exactly the same thing and come away with absolutely contradictory opinions about what they just witnessed. Whether it's nature or nurture or a combination of the two, what is inside of each of us acts as a prism that bends and shapes everything we experience.

In fact even mentioning this sort of thing to a group of people creates opposing ideas in those who hear it – both sides absolutely convinced that the problem is with the other guy. Both come away believing that if the other guy would just open his mind to the truth, he would see things as they do. Which, of course, is the *right* way.

Christians understand that this universal characteristic of humankind can be good or bad. Natural man is born with a distorted sense of right and wrong. Each of us therefore needs to have our natural prism altered, reshaped, redefined. That's what God's Word does. More than that, that's what *only* God's Word does. God the Holy Spirit, working through the power of his Word, creates in us a divine wisdom that allows us to see the world as he sees it. He enables us to recognize truth *as he defines it*. The Holy Spirit is the prism in Christians that allows us to see references to our Savior throughout the Old Testament. The godless read those same words and think us daft for our understanding. We, on the other hand, can't imagine how or why they can't see what is so painfully obvious.

All of this should serve to remind us of just how thankful we ought to be that we now not only have the sure, certain Word of God to serve as our unchanging guide, we have been given eyes to truly recognize what we are looking at. We no longer operate by just by sight but by faith in the truths laid out in God's Word. There we learn of truths that surely confuse those who saw them (both then and now) but that you and I can and do accept as true and certain – simply because God said so.

The fact is many of the things we read about in God's Word carried the potential for doubt and skepticism on the part of those who first saw them. We hear of one such series of events in our text for this morning, found in the Third Chapter of Matthew's Gospel:

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:1-10** *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ ¶ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

These are the verbally inspired words of our God – words that were recorded a couple thousand years ago, and then preserved by God for you and me today. If God went to the trouble of preserving these words for so many centuries, then there certainly must have been a good reason for doing so. That reason, of course, is that man might be converted and then sustained through the power of these words. That God would do just that among us this morning through the study of these holy words, so we pray: "**Sanctify us through your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

If I told you that I saw a really, really strange guy the other day when I was down by the river, you would probably be mildly interested, but you would also naturally and automatically assume that the guy was some sort of a nut-job. There are, after all, lots of those folks along the river south of Mandan these days. It wouldn't help any if I told you that he was one of those gloom and doom "proclaimers of truth" who didn't really have a church or congregation; he just preached messages of dire wrath and

foreboding. Nor would you find it especially surprising that this guy seemed to attract a following of several other ragtag misfits who seemed to think that he was something special, or that the guy was dressed in some strange, primitive get-up and lived on some all-natural diet of some sort.

The fact is you've all heard of this guy, and while these words could well apply to some rather misguided zealot making noise down by the Missouri River west of Bismarck, they are in fact a description of John the Baptist.

Face it. In the eyes of the world (both then and now) John the Baptist would have looked like a pretty strange dude. Try to look at him for just a moment as the world must have seen him – and would see him still today. Here was a social misfit, an oddball, living out in the wild and prophesying terrible forebodings to any and all who would listen. His diet was all natural, but it was all natural grasshoppers and wild honey. He drank no alcohol, and living out in the wilderness undoubtedly gave him something of a wild, unwashed, and unkempt appearance.

Do you suppose, had you lived at the time, that you would have looked at this man and thought to yourself, "*Now there goes probably the greatest man ever born to women!*"? Probably not. You would very likely think exactly what the Pharisees and Sadducees thought: "*Who is this guy?*"

The Christian religion is like that, isn't it? Remember Paul's observations in his First Letter to the Corinthians? "**God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;** ²⁸ **God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,** ²⁹ **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.**" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Christianity was never promoted by God as either logical or fashionable. It was and is therefore a matter of faith – from first to last. It is faith in a promise, faith in a God-man who had a human mother but no human father, faith in a pronouncement of forgiveness that can in no way be corroborated or verified by any outside source. In perfect harmony with this general theme, God himself also raised up John the Baptist to be the great Forerunner of the Promised Savior. Despite his dour message and his wild, forbidding appearance, Jesus himself said of this man that "**Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**" (Matthew 11:11)

If nothing else did, this ought to teach us that the one true faith is, and always will be, impossible to verify by normal, tangible, visible means. Certain elements of our faith might even make us uncomfortable – might even seem a bit repulsive to our normal, flesh-and-blood sensibilities.

Do you remember, for example, when the crowds turned away from Jesus and followed him no longer? That happened when he began to talk about "eating his flesh" and other such hard sayings. Obviously these words carried a whole deeper level of meaning that completely escaped the vast majority of those who first heard them, but the point is that *on the surface* Jesus' words sounded very odd and repulsive.

Prophecies are most often like that – before the fact. They almost always sound kooky, radical, and unlikely in the extreme when they foretell an event that has not yet (by definition) come to pass. Want proof? Try to imagine what you would have thought had someone walked up to you on September 10, 2001 and told you that terrorists were, on the morrow, going to level the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center with two commercial jetliners. Who here wouldn't have dismissed such prophecy as ravings of just another nut-job?

Until the next day.

We today are not burdened by the image of the strange-looking John the Baptist. Our hind-sight is now 20/20 perfect and shaped by the other truths of Scripture. *Of course* John the Baptist was a great man; *of course* he spoke the truth; *of course* he was sent by God himself and was indeed the Great Forerunner of the Savior himself. But that's probably not what it looked like then, is it?

But then why do we read what we do in our text? Why do we there learn that also the Pharisees and the Sadducees went out not only to see and hear John, but our text says that John "**saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism**"? Why? Is it possible that they really did want to be baptized by John, even though it seems clear that they doubted both his message and his office?

At the time of Jesus, the enemies of Jesus seemed to have almost an animal awareness of the coming battle. Jesus and Satan were about to engage in mortal combat for the eternity of mankind. John looked at those who were coming to him not with his human eyes but with the eyes of faith, and the result was that he recognized that which escaped the human comprehension of those around him. You heard in our text how he labeled these men when he said: "**Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**"

That's not exactly the textbook manner of greeting visitors to our worship services today, is it? The great John the Baptist therefore knew these men for what they were. He also here foretold "**the wrath to come**" which was undoubtedly a reference to the struggle that was about to take place between the Son of God and the devil, as well as the destruction of Jerusalem that would follow.

It is also interesting that John here ties the coming of Christ with the first gospel promise in the Garden of Eden by referring to these men (very likely some of the same individuals that later crucified the Lord Jesus) as **"a brood of vipers."** You remember that first promise, where God foretold that the offspring of the serpent (brood of vipers) would do damage to the Offspring of the woman (Jesus) but that that Offspring of the woman would also thereby crush the devil and destroy his power. John correctly identifies these enemies of Jesus as the offspring of the Serpent. The rest of the world missed it.

Unfortunately the world is still "missing it" today. While this is tragic enough, the problem is immeasurably compounded by the fact that they now openly ridicule those who *do* know and believe the truth. That means you and me. Understand that this ridicule – which is becoming more and more brazen – is one of Satan's most powerful weapons. Most human beings treasure their public image, which means that most of us have a natural aversion to being labeled odd or unsophisticated. This is undoubtedly why so many Christians today struggle to find some compromise with the world, professing only those aspects of Christianity (like peace, kindness, and love) that appeal to and are tolerated by the world around them.

Christians are called to be more than that. You and I have been given a rare and special gift to be able to distinguish truth from error – even when that truth involves some pretty radical ideas, like a virgin birth, God-made-man, a Triune God, and the reception of Jesus' very body and blood in Holy Communion. You and I have been given the grace to know that that which feels right and natural (like the notion that we have to somehow earn our way to heaven and make up for our own sins) is actually a damning lie persuasively peddled by the devil himself. You and I have been given the grace to look in the manger with the eyes of faith and there see the world's Savior-God. We have also been given the grace to be able to look at something like evolution and to recognize it as the utter nonsense that it is.

Know then that Satan will continue to send lying signs and wonders out into our world, and know that those powerful illusions will war against the unreasonable truth that your God has given you to know. Thank your God for the divine wisdom that is now yours, and seek daily to increase that wisdom through your study of his Holy Word. And then be comforted in the certain knowledge that the Second Coming of our Savior God holds no terror or dread for you, but only the joy and peace that he longs to share with you in his heaven. God the Holy Spirit preserve each of us through to that great day. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 11:1-5, 10** There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. ¹⁰ ¶ In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples--of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:4-13** For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ ¶ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." ¹⁰ And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." ¹³ ¶ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

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2nd Sunday in Advent – December 4, 2016

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 72 (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 11:1-5, 10) Note both the law and the gospel so clearly evident in our Old Testament lesson. So also it will be at the coming of the Lord on the Last Day. Christians will greet that Day with unbridled joy and unimaginable relief. Not so those who reject Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Therefore while we seek to feed our souls and anticipate his coming, we also work tirelessly that others may join us in the joy of that great day.

Psalm of the Day – Psalm 24 (Supplement page 25) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 15:4-13) Throughout the New Testament God the Holy Spirit made plain to us that Jesus died to pay not just for the sins of some (not just for the sins of the Jews and not just for the sins of Christians) but for the sum total of the sins of the entire world. All are invited to the "wedding feast" of the Lamb of God. The Bible also teaches us that unity of faith and doctrine in all that we teach and believe is the best possible plan for saving sinners. Our infallible guide, as always, is the Word of God.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 73 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 3:1-10 (Printed on the back page)

"Learn to See What You Are Looking At"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 95 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Savior of the Nations Come"

The Offering

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn - 73 (Verse 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Sunday (41) Ave (48) Wednesday (20)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
	-11:15 a.m.	– Choir Practice
Wednesday	-5:30 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Advent Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/Coffee Time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Pastor Luke Bernthal is considering the call to St. Stephen of San Francisco. Pastor Michael Wilke is considering the call to Zion of Atlanta.

Christmas Party – Thanks to those who worked to make last night's Church Christmas party great fun – as usual. We appreciate your efforts. Thanks also to all those who stayed late last Sunday to decorate the church.

Annual Voters' Meeting – Our Annual Voters' meeting is scheduled for Sunday, December 18. A fellowship meal is also planned for that date. This is the most important church meeting of the year. All voting members should consider attendance as part of their leadership responsibilities. This is the meeting where, among other things, elections are held and the budget for next year is set.

Midweek Advent Services – Relatively few were able to attend the first of our three Advent Services last Wednesday. Two more services remain. Try make use of these opportunities. It is a good time to refocus and rededicate during this very distracting season.

Confirmation Class – Confirmation parents and students please note that the start time for Confirmation classes during Advent is 5:30 pm.

Usher/Cleaner List – The first draft of the 2017 Usher/Cleaner list is on the mailbox table. Please take a look and make Fred Adams aware of any changes that need to be made.