

"What Would John the Baptist Say to You?"

Text: Luke 3:1-9

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

Dear Fellow Christians:

What is it in human beings that seems to find such satisfaction in seeing others "get it" – especially when, in your humble opinion, they really, really have it coming? It starts very early in life, doesn't it? I remember not being bothered one bit when my siblings got a whippin'. I also remember being somewhat startled by how calmly my own children took the applied love that was meted out to someone else. No matter what kind of bloody murder was being raised by a beloved brother or sister, the non-receiving party just seemed to go merrily about his or her business – apparently just happy to be alive, and ignored, for the present.

The same phenomenon continues unabated throughout most or all of our adult years. In the Old West, town was never so busy as when the hanging judge was in town doing what he did best. Even today human beings seem to have a profoundly morbid sense of satisfaction at seeing the proud, popular, or powerful fall. Witness the unbelievable media attention when the famous fall.

I'm really not sure why we are the way we are. Is it envy, are we jealous, cruel, sadistic, or is it something else? Hard to say, although whatever it is it almost certainly is not a positive human trait. Oh we would like to pretend it is a desire for justice, but it is almost certainly something much darker. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find the same sorts of human failings when we read God's Word. Don't you find it rather satisfying to hear Jesus lay into the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, for example, in Matthew 23, or one of the prophets of old lambast those stubborn Jews in the Old Testament? So too this morning we get to be spectators as the fiery John the Baptist scorches the hypocritical Jewish leaders who came out to gawk at him as he baptized beside the Jordan River.

Only we are never supposed to be *spectators* when we read God's Word, are we? These things were not written for our entertainment but for our instruction. This morning then we make our text personal by turning the attention of John upon ourselves as we ask: "*What would John the Baptist say to me, had I been in that crowd beside the Jordan River?*" To

guide us in rightly answering this question we turn to God's Word, recorded this morning in the Gospel of Luke, the Third Chapter:

^{ESV} **Luke 3:1-9** *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁷ ¶ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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. ⁹ 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."*

So far the very Word of God. God himself has given these words to you, and herein offers you wisdom, strength, and comfort. You are therefore blessed each time you hear God's Word and treasure it. To that end we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

What was your reaction to the first part of our text for this morning – the part with all the names and places in the first three verses? You pretty much suffered through that part, didn't you? In one ear and out the other? Not much there, after all, of any real interest. While that's probably a fair description of our reaction to all those strange names and places, it's hard to reconcile that with the fact that our God doesn't do fluff. He didn't include random inanities in his verbally inspired word. In fact what God accomplished with those first three verses was to remove what comes next from the realm of "once upon a time" and introduce it instead in its historical context as an historical fact. He thereby announces that what he is about to reveal to us is much more than fiction or make-believe. This naming of specific, known, historical

names and places is undoubtedly intended to make all of this absolutely real – as it truly was and is.

John the Baptist therefore wasn't just a fictional character. He was a living, breathing human being, and the words credited to him in our text really were spoken by him. The point here is that the introductory words of our text are not just filler or throw-away verbiage – pointless, useless words – they are intended to verify that the account that will follow is absolutely real. So then just as history acknowledges that men like Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate were real, so also men like Zacharias and his son, John the Baptist, were real. As one lived, so did the other. All were actual human beings who actually said and did the things credited to them in our text.

Yet, again, the mantra also bears repeating that not only are these events supposed to be real to us, we are never supposed to be mere spectators of the very real actions laid out for us on the pages of God's Word. So then this morning, for example, we are obliged to resist at least two temptations even before we begin the study of our text. The first, as was just mentioned, is to resist the temptation to act as a disconnected spectator. The second is the temptation wherein we allow that nasty side we all have to revel in watching others get dressed down or castigated by John the Baptist. We attempt to solve both problems by asking a rather simple question of ourselves: *"What would John the Baptist say to me?"*

Surely this is not at all an unreasonable, inappropriate, or unlikely question. Several different groups of people, after being cut to the heart by John's preaching, did exactly what we are asking of ourselves. In other words, they asked John specifically for advice or counsel as to how they should follow up on his message of true repentance and reform. Listen to the verses that follow our text: ***And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"*** ¹¹ ***And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."*** ¹² ***Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"*** ¹³ ***And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."*** ¹⁴ ***Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."*** (Luke 3:10-14)

This morning, therefore, you and I join that crowd near the Jordan River and pose our question too of John: ***"What shall we do then?"*** John then turns his attention to you and me this morning. How would he answer? What would he say?

To answer we need first to understand the sum and substance of his message. You heard his words in our text (read them again for review) but what exactly was he *telling* both them and us? What did his words actually mean; what truth was he trying to convey?

The answer: *Be honest – really honest – with yourself.*

The society of John's day was evidently not all that different from our own. They were big on show, big on façade, big on fake. Not so good at reality. You heard what John said to the fakes who came not to learn from him but to evaluate and criticize: ***"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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."*** The folks in John's day apparently gave lip-service to "repentance," but evidently that was pretty much the extent of it. As far as they were concerned, repentance was great, just as long as it didn't mean having to change anything about their behavior.

As far as the Jews were concerned, they imagined that their ticket to heaven was the very fact that they were Jews – God's chosen people. In other words, they were going to heaven because Abraham was their ancestor. You heard John's response to such nonsense: ***"And do not begin 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."***

The story is as old as man himself. Man wants external facades to suffice. So today we don't claim Abraham as our ancestor, but we do occasionally take some false comfort in outward church membership and our Lutheran heritage. "We have Abraham" can be replaced with "We have Martin Luther." There is also the very real problem that our sinful nature wants to do God's will, but only if we really don't have to do God's will. In other words, man's natural idea of "pleasing God" is to have God accept whatever man does as his will. Nothing much has changed since John's day. In fact John's whole point was that repentance was a heart issue that manifested or demonstrated itself in actions. Both elements (heart and actions) had to be present. So too in our confessions we ask ourselves not just about our own hearts ("Are you sorry for your sins?") but also follow up with intentions ("Do you intend to amend your sinful life?")

So, again, what would John say to you? The answer, if you are a non-Christian (an unbeliever) is that you couldn't care less what John might say to you. If an unbeliever cares at all, it is simply out of fear, for they are a part of the **"Brood of Vipers fleeing the coming wrath."** The answer, if you are a Christian, is that John couldn't possibly say enough. While the godless are simply annoyed by condemnations of their sinful lifestyles and quickly and easily dismiss them, Christians walking in the new man always seem eager to have their blind spots pointed out to them. The new man in us longs to correct ALL that is amiss in our lives and to follow through on our good intentions with **"fruits worthy of repentance."**

So what would John the Baptist point out as some of our weak areas or blind spots? To some he would undoubtedly point out that you seem to be burying yourself with things – that your world is focused not on your spiritual needs (**"the one thing needful"**) but on continually accumulating more "stuff." To some he would probably ask why God's Word is such a small part of your week; to others he would point out that you are not serving as a very good example for your young children; to still others that you are absolutely wasting your time of grace on fluffy, meaningless pursuits (video games, television, etc.)

The point is that if you, dear Christian, spend a quiet moment and ask this question of yourself, the specific answer that applies to your life and your circumstances will be made known to you. You will know *exactly* what John the Baptist would say to you, if you actually take the time to do some soul searching.

But let me remind you of one more thing that John would say to you – and not just a thing, the thing. Understand that I do not have to guess here. I don't have to use my "sanctified Christian imagination" to come up with this. John himself said it: **"Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!"**

John's calling was to prepare the way for his Lord – to call sinners to repentance. Yet understand that his true emphasis is never on simple behavior modification; it is on turning sinners to their Lord and Savior, so that they too might be saved. Robotic obedience is neither the answer nor the goal. Salvation is the goal, and that salvation, that deliverance, is only found in Jesus Christ. John's perfect gospel proclamation **"Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world!"** identifies the very heart of our hope and our Christian faith. God does not overlook sin; he punished his Son for the sins of all mankind, and has declared us to be sin-free because of what Jesus has done for us.

What would John the Baptist say to you? You are a sinner, but the debt for your sins has been paid by the Lamb of God. The result of what Jesus did is that you will not get what you have coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Malachi 3:1-7** "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² ¶ But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵ ¶ "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. ⁶ ¶ "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'

^{ESV} **Philippians 1:2-11** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ ¶ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mark Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor

The Second Sunday in Advent – December 9, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 68 (Red Hymnal)

"The Advent of Our King"

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

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

The Old Testament Lesson: (Malachi 3:1-7) God's ongoing mercy and forbearance often gives the illusion of indifference or permissiveness on God's part. In other words, since God withholds his punishment for the sins of the Godless, many come to imagine that God is indifferent toward such things. Nothing could be further from the truth. Part of our Advent preparation is to be reminded of God's unchanging attitude towards sin.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 84 (Supplement Page 40)

The New Testament Lesson: (Philippians 1:2-11) Paul here expresses his delight with the Christians in and around Philippi. Yet notice that even as he praises and builds them up, he also points out to them the ongoing need for Christian growth. Faith is never a static thing; it is either diminishing or being strengthened. Our Lord obviously wants to see growth and advancement in all of his children, both then and now. Our God desires not just our survival; he wants strong, confident, highly educated Christians.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 72 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 3:1-9 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"What Would John the Baptist Say to You?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 72 (Stanza 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers"

The Prayers of the Day followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 50 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"

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 (35) Average (41) Wednesday (21)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school (No Bible Class)
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Wednesday	-5:45 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 Service w/communion
	-11:30 a.m.	– Fellowship Meal
	-12:00 p.m.	– Annual Voters and WF Meetings

CLC News – Pastor Ed Starkey is considering the call to Our Redeemer's of Red Wing.

Sponsors Needed – The CLC Kinship Committee has announced the immediate need for sponsors – both for foreign seminary students and for orphans. Please speak to the Pastor for further information.

Confirmation Class and Advent Service – Confirmation parents please note that Confirmation Class start time is again 5:45 this Wednesday, followed by our Advent Services at 7pm.

Pastor Out of Town – Pastor Roehl is out of town this weekend visiting family. Plans call for his return tomorrow. Our thanks to those laymen who are bringing us the Word this morning in the Pastor's absence.

Communion Schedule – Holy Communion is scheduled to be offered here at St Paul next Sunday, December 16 and again on Sunday, December 30. Private communion is always available from the Pastor.

Annual Meeting – Our Annual Voters Meeting is scheduled for next Sunday. The Women's Fellowship will also meet on that date. As is our custom, a fellowship meal is scheduled for after the worship service and prior to the meetings. The Annual Budget is set at this Voters meeting, as well as elections to fill the two expiring Council positions.