

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday in Advent - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Luke 1:46b-55 (alternate)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

12/17/2017

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

as the prophet Isaiah said.

24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Let us pray,

Amen

John Who?

Good morning! Today’s sermon will be more educational than anything else. Last week I heard a few comments about John the Baptist and wanted to give everyone a refresher on this strange and unique person from scripture. John is often distinguished by the addition of the title “the Baptist” at the end of his name. No, “the Baptist” is not his last name, just as “Christ” isn’t Jesus’ last name. We find scripture about John in all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. We also find mention of John by Josephus, a famous first century Jewish historian. John the Baptist also makes appearances in

several non-canonical stories, 8 in total, books like the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Acts of Pilate*, and *Protevangelium of James*.¹ So it's safe to say that the man existed.

We hear of John's birth in the Gospel of Luke, where we are told that John's father Zechariah is a temple priest, and his mother Elizabeth is a descendant of the tribe of Aaron, the priestly tribe. Like Abraham and Sarah, both Zechariah and Elizabeth are old and barren, unable to conceive when God promises them a child. Zechariah doesn't believe the angel that appears to him and is unable to speak until after the birth of the child. We are told that Elizabeth and Mary are related, and when Mary "sets out with haste to the hill country" she is greeted by Elizabeth who shouts those famous words, and if you're a converted Catholic you can say it with me:

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."*²

After John's birth we are told that *"The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."*³ We don't hear anything else from John until the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John appears proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins and delivers some very scolding words to the crowds and leaders.

We hear of John's death in the gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's only in Matthew that we read the account in its fullest, giving us the only ever flashback in the entire New Testament. In Matthew 14 we are told that Herod had John imprisoned for his taking his brother's wife, Herodias. Her daughter danced for Herod and when he granted her a favor she

¹The New Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. Vol. 3. pp. 346

² Luke 1:42 (NRSV)

³ Luke 1:80 (NRSV)

asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The Jewish historian Josephus also corroborates the claim that Herod had John the Baptist murdered.⁴

The Gospel of Matthew tells of John's ministry simply by saying that he appeared "*proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*"⁵ We get the details about his clothing being camel's hair and a simple leather belt and his food being only locusts and wild honey. We can also be pretty sure that John baptized Jesus. Scholars have a little tool to help determine the validity of a story in scripture. The more embarrassing the story is for Christians, the more likely it is to have happened. In the Gospel of Mark, the oldest and first gospel, we are told simply that John baptizes Jesus in the river Jordan. In the Gospel of Luke, written the same time as the Gospel of Matthew, roughly 10 years after the Gospel of Mark, we hear that John is imprisoned and that "*when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...*"⁶ It's a tricky way of avoiding the question as to why Jesus even needs to be baptized. The Gospel of Matthew handles the problem differently, having John say that he would have prevented Jesus from being baptized, saying "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*"⁷ The Gospel of John, the last gospel written, doesn't even talk about Jesus' baptism. It avoids the question entirely.

We find similarities between John and several of the Old Testament prophets. He dresses like Elijah and does extensive work near the river Jordan. The prophet Malachi, who is the one

⁴The New Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. Vol. 3. pp. 350

⁵ Matthew 3:2 (NRSV)

⁶ John 3:21 (NRSV)

⁷ Matthew 3:14

prophet that speaks out against divorce, is probably where John gets his defense for speaking out against King Herod. We also see connections between John and the prophet Isaiah, most notably the text we heard last week for our first reading in Isaiah 40:3 “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

John uses the wilderness and baptism in the river Jordan in symbolic ways, one scholar writes: *“The symbolism of a purified people returning home from east to west evoked the original crossing of the Jordan under Joshua (Joshua 3-4) and signified a new beginning for Israel... By meeting John at the Jordan, repenting, and being baptized, the people have reestablished their election as Abraham's true descendants.”*⁸

And John’s story wasn’t over when he died. We know from the gospels that he had followers, some of whom became disciples of Jesus after John’s death. Others, who didn’t follow Jesus, continued the John story, creating an offshoot group that is called the Mandaeans. Interestingly, this group lives on, located in southern Iraq, with its own official scripture.⁹ His story lives on in Christianity too, passed down in scripture and other stories.

John arrives every Advent as a herald of what is to come. He is literally the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, calling on us to make straight the path. He calls on us to repent, to turn our lives around, to live into our baptismal promises. And most importantly, for us today at least, John helps us to testify. As our Gospel lesson for today proclaims, he came to testify to the light. It might surprise you to find out, but our jobs aren’t so different from John’s. We are not

⁸The New Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. Vol. 3. pp. 347

⁹The New Interpreter's dictionary of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. Vol. 3. pp. 350

the light, but we exist to give the light proof. Just as the moon reflects the sun, our beauty is its greatest when we reflect Jesus Christ the most completely. Remember that this Advent.

Remember it always. Amen.