

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Third Sunday of Advent - Year B
41st Sunday of Pandemic
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28
12/13/2020

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.” 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

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

Amen

Setting the Stage

Good morning! Have you ever watched the World Rally Championship? Of all the automotive racing that one can do, it's by far the most insane. Don't get me wrong, I have respect for racing like NASCAR, I love Formula 1, and Le Mans racing is very challenging, but nothing can compare to the level of absolute craziness that you see in rally driving. It was probably started by a group of people who wanted to see which car could drive through the woods the fastest, and it's been going on ever since. In almost all racing sports the tracks are created with safety for the driver and spectator in mind, but in rally driving, its full throttle on dirt roads, through towns, and in all weather. And the fans are crazy too, trying to get as near to the car as possible when it drives by and jumping into the road after a crash to roll the car over so that it can keep going. The drivers who pilot these all-wheel-drive hatchbacks are maniacs. Each car makes something like 700 horsepower and weighs less than 3,000 lbs. In snow, rain, mud, dust, and anything in-between they drive their cars to the limit. And of all the drivers, one stands above the rest: Sébastien Loeb. After winning more races and championships than any other driver ever, he called it quits a few years ago, after winning 9 championships in a row. But here's the thing, you might not have ever heard of him were it not for the craziest person of them all, Daniel Elena. While Loeb drives full tilt through

the forest, Elena sits calmly in the passenger seat, entrusting his life to the driver while Elena looks down at the pace notes, telling the driver what the course is like. The races are too large to memorize, so the co-driver reads off the stage for the driver, allowing them to know what's coming up after the next turn.

Now, while the co-driver serves an important purpose, it all becomes worthless without the actual driver. Don't worry, I'll refrain from making any cheesy "Jesus take the wheel" jokes in this sermon, but it's clear that John the Baptist, like Elena, announces the way too, but for Jesus Christ. While John is the first to testify to Jesus Christ, he cannot be the last.

What we hear today is in some ways a repeat of what we heard last week. Again, we find ourselves at the beginning of a Gospel, listening to the words and work of John, who is not given the common title "John the Baptist" in this Gospel. John proclaims the same message that we heard last week: *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"* The message from the prophet Isaiah is again proclaimed as the impetus for John's work. We do see a few additions and differences. The first is the visit from the priests and Levites who come to find out who John is, asking if he is a prophet, or Elijah, or the Messiah. The second difference is the addition of their question regarding why he is baptizing. Because the Gospel of John was the last of our four Gospels to be written, the writer had time to think over any problems or questions from the original stories. So, when the early Christians asked why John was baptizing in the first place, the Gospel writer is able to ask those same questions and incorporate an answer of their own.

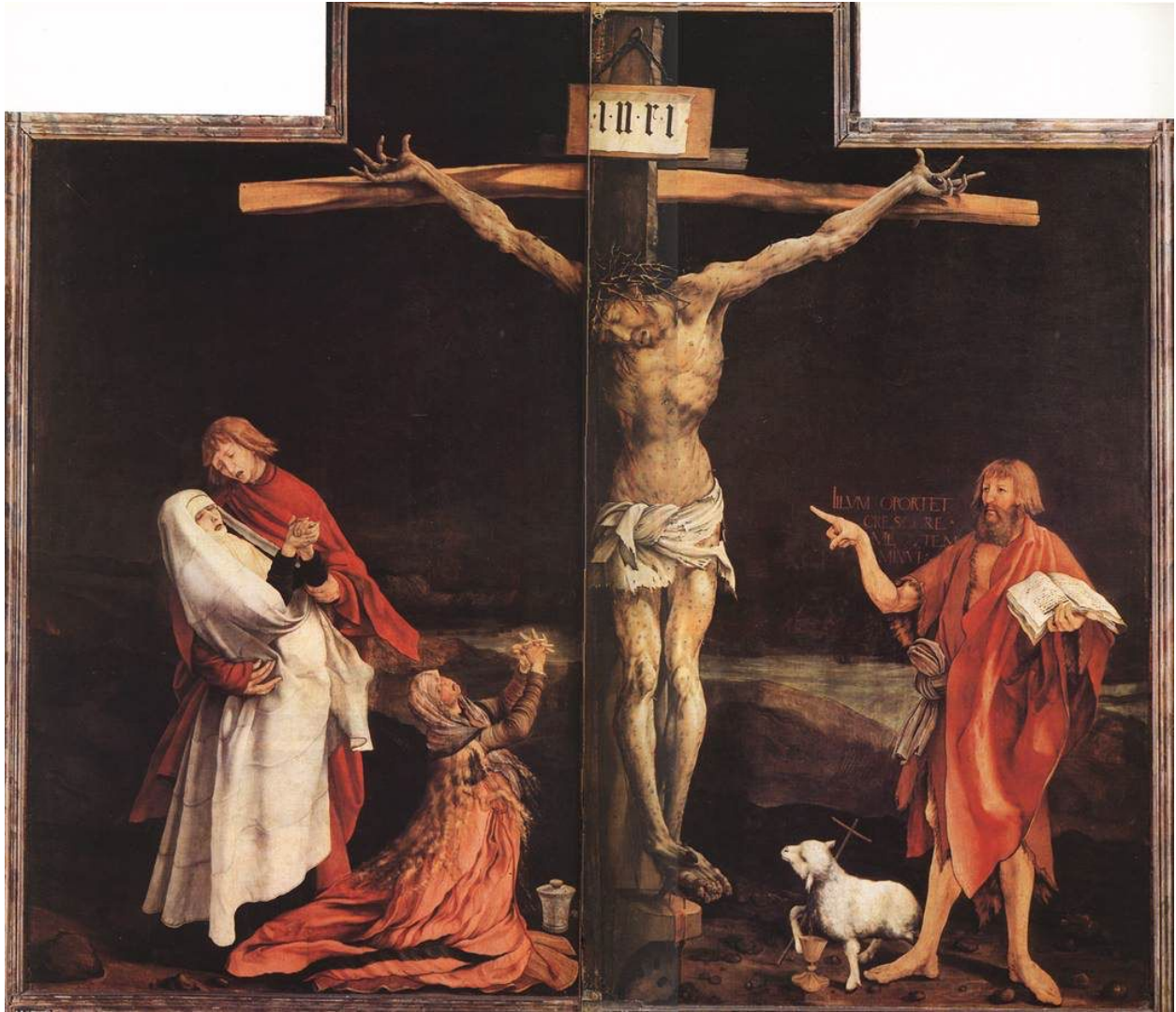
Regardless of the similarities and differences, the focus today remains John's testimony. As I said, John was the first to testify regarding Jesus

Christ, but as one scholar points out; “... *all of us who come to Advent worship are witnesses. Our witnessing turns us from the excessive preoccupation with ourselves... The pastoral temptation of Advent is to turn from attention to our waiting for Christ and to focus instead on our waiting for Christ.*”¹ Which is tempting, right? In the craziness of this season we can so easily turn the focus inward, especially in a year like the one we’ve had this time around. But to do that breaks the oldest rule in my theological handbook: keeping God the subject of the active verb. John, and the reader, gather together to witness God’s work of salvation.

And God’s story of salvation kicks into high gear in this season of Advent. We must ask ourselves the tough questions as we witness to this work. David L. Bartlett writes that “*The questions we ask of every Sunday’s worship are especially questions for Advent. Is God worshipped? Is Christ proclaimed? Do we bear witness to those who wander into this family celebration puzzled and lonely?*”² Once again, I am reminded of Matthias Grunewald’s painting *Crucifixion*. Within it we see Christ on the cross, and to the side the image of John the Baptist, pointing to the savior, bearing witness to God’s work. As my seminary professor Dr. Everett liked to point out, we are like the bony finger of John the Baptist too, pointing to Jesus.

¹Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 68.

²Ibid. p. 70.



At this time of year you'll see countless "reasons for the season." People will say this is the season of giving, or the time for family. A time of peace and good will towards all. But when those become the primary motivating factors, regardless of how good they are, we fail to grasp the lesson that John is teaching us. The Messiah is coming, and God will once again shine a light of hope on the whole world. Amen.