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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson, the First Chapter of St. Mark. It is the testimony of John the Baptist, who says this:

⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.(Mark 1:8, RSV)

John the Baptist was a great man in the eyes both of Jerusalem and of God. He *must have been* an impressive man that the city folk of Jerusalem should leave that elegant capitol city and travel out into the wilderness to hear the preaching of an ascetic — aye, a plain man whose preaching toward them was often quite fierce.

If we were to meet John, I imagine that we would understand ourselves to be in the presence of a powerful personality — a veritable Rasputin, only good! His eyes would pierce us, his preaching would convict us, he would inspire in us a desire to be better people. He would shepherd us toward repentance, as he shepherded so many people back in those early days.

And so, yes, John was a great man. But John knew of a Greater Man. And that is the distinction I want to lift up for us this morning — the difference between a good man and our Savior, and between a good manner of life and something even higher: I mean life in Christ.

In his poetic way, former Pastor Raymond Schulze once used a line in a wedding sermon about the distinction between “great” and “greater,” between “ordinary” and “extraordinary.” His line surprised me and I have found myself pondering it all these years later. His text was a classic marriage text: the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee. The Church loves to repeat that story at weddings because it is so delightful to think that our Lord’s first miracle was performed at a wedding. You recall it, I am sure. The wine for the wedding festivities had run out, and Jesus, desiring to continue and increase the joy of the celebration, changed water into wine, and that wine was the finest of all.

And so Pastor Schulze said something like this to the young couple standing before him. He said that we know what an “ordinary marriage” is like. I add that probably many of us in this world have ordinary marriages, and they are sacred and to be honored, each one. But Pastor Schulze was pressing for something more for this young couple. He wanted their life in Christ to launch these two young people into each other’s arms in a Christ-like way, such that they really would love and cherish each other till the end of their days, as long as their hearts were beating, that they would love each other with a love that was true and faithful, forgiving and forbearing, always seeking the good in the beloved, always seeking that one day, the joy and passion they knew on earth would reach all the way to heaven, and that one day they would be proud to introduce their beloved on earth to their Beloved in heaven.

And so Pastor Schulze phrased his appeal to the young couple somewhat like this: You know what an ordinary marriage is like. But I urge you to so let your Christian faith

be part of your marriage that Christ in you “will change the water of an ordinary marriage into the fine wine of an extraordinary marriage.”

I believe that John the Baptist would broaden the appeal. John says to us: I and other preachers can try to shepherd you toward repentance and amendment of life. But I know of a Greater Man who can do even more for you: He can shepherd you into the Holy Spirit himself.

And so, let us notice John’s particular way of expressing the excellence of this Greater Man. I think it is awfully interesting. John said about himself that he baptized people by plunging them into water. But this Greater One, John said, would not plunge them into water, but into the Holy Spirit¹.

And that you are! If you are baptized, *you* are the one who has been plunged into the Holy Spirit by Jesus. And the world awaits something good from you. Or if you are not yet plunged into the Holy Spirit, you are always invited to that great status by way of Holy Baptism.

Let us try to reckon with what that means for us? What is it like to have dealings with the Holy Spirit? Well, judging by the Bible, including the Old Testament, the coming of the Holy Spirit means an increase of life and energy on earth. When the Spirit comes, watch out! When the Spirit of the Lord moved upon the waters of the deep, for example, back when the world was without form and void and restless, well, the brooding of that Spirit meant the springing forward of creation, of order and life.

When the Spirit comes upon Samson, he bursts the chords with which his enemies have bound him, picks up the old, dried jawbone of a donkey, slays a thousand Philistines, and in the process the political fortunes of Israel lurches ahead (Judges 15).

When the Spirit comes upon the shepherd boy David, he becomes fearless and ready to contend with a lion, even with that mighty giant Goliath. And in that Spirit he becomes Israel’s greatest poet and writer of the Psalms.

When the Spirit comes upon the valley of dry bones, those bones remain dry and lifeless no longer.

When the Spirit comes upon Stephen in the early church, he calmly preaches to his enemies, and just as calmly faces the stones with which they pummel him to death, not cursing them, but praying for them:

Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.(Acts 7:60, KJV)

And when the Spirit guided Paul and Silas, it mattered not that the magistrates laid many stripes upon them, cast them into prison, and charged the jailor to keep them safely. When you are dealing with the Spirit, the ordinary run of things changes, and they change for the better, so that the prison doors spring open and Paul calls to the jailor to do himself no harm, for Jesus was near to him.(Acts 16).

Do you see what I mean? If John is looking forward to Someone greater than him, to Someone who could immerse us not in water, but in the Holy Spirit, well, then, John was expecting a Greater One indeed.

“Any old dead fish can float downstream,” my Sunday School teacher used to say, “but it takes a live one to swim upstream.”

¹ A fine point made by Prof. William J. Abraham in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* on our passage, Mark 1:1-8.

That is what you, Christ's man, Christ's woman, are meant for. You are meant to be a live one. You are meant to be this world's curveball, the unexpected source of some goodness in this world.

Carol recently pointed out to me that I taught our boys a certain saying. Just about every morning of their young lives, I would give them a hug and a kiss and send them out the door saying, "Remember, always take good care of your mother." Carol says that she is grateful for that and thinks that it will help prepare our boys to be good husbands someday.

A few days ago, Carol led the funeral service for an elderly man at The Wartburg nursing home. He was ninety-nine years old, still in love with his wife who had died fourteen years earlier, still waiting to be off to be with her and with Christ.

Like me, this old man had taught his children a certain motto, and his children hoped that Carol would include that saying in her sermon. She was glad to do so. His motto went like this: "Do good, and fear not." Carol was proud to include that saying in the funeral. It has much to do with being immersed in the Holy Spirit.

For you see, Christ's man, Christ's woman is the one who *can* do good and fear not. And aside from Him I do not see how this could be such a rational policy.

Neither John the Baptist, nor his baptism in water, could do quite this for a man or a woman: He could not strengthen them to "do good and fear not" because he could not swear that he would be with them to make sure that their good won out. But Jesus *can* swear it, he *has* sworn it, with his own body and blood he has sworn it. And he is risen from the grave, triumphant over death, to walk with us and shelter us so that we *can* do good and fear not. We really can. We just need to venture forth.

To be baptized into the Christian Church is to become Christ's man, Christ's woman. And then there will be adventures upon adventures ahead of you, for you will be casting your fate in with Jesus, conforming your life to his, doing good and fearing not, for you can trust yourself to this Greater One for time and for eternity. Day by day you will be invited to walk immersed in the Holy Spirit, and that will be good for you and for our world.

All glory then, to John the Baptist's Greater One, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.