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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/14/2008, Advent 3B  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

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

The times are tough, brother, and get tougher. The folks are hurting, sister, and getting downhearted. This past week, my wife Carol lead a breakfast pastoral counseling session with the staff of one of the departments at The Wartburg Community up in Mt. Vernon, because the stress of these days is taking such a hard toll on the workers. Their health was breaking down, with heart attacks, high blood pressure, 911 responders rushing to the place to rescue people. It is the same in many places of the workplace. Some workers are heartsick at being laid off. Many workers are anxious because they fear they *will be* laid off, and besides that, if they are permitted to retain their jobs, still their workload becomes heavier and heavier as their colleagues are let go.

When our Intercessions this morning reach the petition for our public servants, we should indeed sing out our Kyrie:

For our public servants, for the government *and those who protect us*, that they may be upheld and strengthened in every good deed, let us pray to the Lord. *Lord, have mercy!*

Yes, we should pray fervently for the economy and for those who manage it, that the people of our land will be spared suffering and their burdens lifted.

A couple days ago, our Christmas carolers from the church went and sang our carols at Lenox Hill Hospital, as we do each year. Yet this year, something seemed different about that fine hospital. It seemed to me that we encountered more empty beds, even some wings of the hospital that were darkened and deserted. In many ways things were the same. Hospital staff and patients were glad to hear us, and yet I found myself wondering, "Where are all the people?" Finally, we worked our way down to the first floor, and we decided to ask whether we could sing in the emergency ward. To do so would be somewhat problematic. At first glance, an emergency ward is chaotic and stressful, with frightened people and hospital staff hard at work. It did not seem likely that our group of carolers could stand in the midst of all that activity and sing Christmas carols. But I thought maybe we could stand in a quiet hallway off a ways, so that the people in the emergency ward could still hear us. So I asked one of the nurses, and without hesitation she answered, "Oh, yes! Come with me." And she led us right into the very midst of the ward. And then it dawned on me, "Here is where the people are! Maybe they can't afford the hospital itself, but here they are in the emergency ward." And so we sang to them: "Angels we have heard on high." And no one complained. None of the doctors, none of the nurses, none of the technicians, none of the patients. The work of medicine continued, and we stood among them and sang our Gloria. We had the strong, sweet voices of Christine Hoffman, Douglas Puffert, and Richard Schreiber to help lead us, and I think we sounded pretty good, and the emergency ward seemed grateful to us.

To be a preacher in these tough times is somewhat like being the Christmas carolers in the emergency ward. I do not know how to change the i.v. tube. I do not know how to

diagnose or to treat. I know just about nothing along medical lines. But I can stand here and try to sing a Gloria.

Few of us have much influence in the large worlds of economy and government. We have more control over the management of our own households, but even there, there might not be a whole lot more that we can do, because we have already been as careful as we could be. We might already have wrung every drop of help we can get from the washcloth of household economy. But in the matter of the heart and of the spirit as we face these tough times, I think we can learn something from the lowliness of John the Baptist as we see him in this morning's Gospel Lesson. Oh, John is lowly, yes, but his humility is not of the defeatist or self-deprecating time. Rather, his lowliness is but the other side of the coin of a great joy: the joy that is meant for you and for me too. And in that joy, John faithfully labored on, till at last he was called home. He sang his Gloria, and labored on in the strength of it.

My text, then, is from our Gospel Lesson, from the First Chapter of St. John. It is the answer John the Baptist gave when priests and Levites from Jerusalem came to ask him, "Who are you?" John answered with these words:

<sup>20</sup>He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." (John 1:20-21, RSV)

Greatly to be praised is lowliness of spirit. Another man might have had humility enough for the first answer, but not for the second. "Are you the Christ?" John is honest and humble enough to answer, "No." "What then? Are you Elijah?" Another man, especially if he were graced with the character and charisma of John, might have answered, "Yes, I do believe I am." And there would have been justice on John's side if he had given such an answer. For, according to the teaching of Jesus, John in fact *was* the long-awaited return of Elijah:

<sup>10</sup>And the disciples asked [Jesus], "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" <sup>11</sup>He replied, "Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; <sup>12</sup>but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands." <sup>13</sup>Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:10-13, RSV)

If John had conceived himself as Elijah, he would have been aspiring to a very high spiritual status, for, as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* puts it, Elijah was "The loftiest and most wonderful prophet of the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup> And here at Immanuel, we bear special affection for Elijah because he appears in our Transfiguration painting above our reredos. There he is, appearing with Moses and our Lord Jesus.

Elijah was a ninth-century B.C. prophet. He was a true son of the desert, sometimes living in caves, wearing skin garments and leather girdle (2 Kings 1:8), and preaching with passion, even violence, in defense of the God of Israel and against the pagan practices introduced by King Ahab and his foreign wife Jezebel. And a wonderful thing about Elijah is that he did not die, but was rather transported up to heaven. It was a very

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05381b.htm>

dramatic scene. Elijah knew his time on earth was nearing an end. He seemed to desire privacy as he walked the hills of Moab, but his disciple Elisha lingered with him and so was blessed to behold the transport of Elijah. The story goes this way:

<sup>11</sup>And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. <sup>12</sup>And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.(2 Kings 2:11-12, KJV)

Then, later, it was granted unto the prophet Malachi (around 450 B.C.) to promise that Elijah would come again:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.(Malachi 4:5, RSV)

This is the background for the second question the priests and Levites from Jerusalem ask John the Baptist:

“What then? Are you Elijah?”

And this is the status John the Baptist declines:

He said, “I am not.”(John 1:20-21, RSV)

Again, it would have been no injustice if John had claimed that status, for he was due it in the estimation of Jesus himself. Furthermore, it was reasonable to think that John was indeed the return of Elijah for John was a massive spiritual figure on the scene. Indeed, the Jewish historian Josephus seems to have considered John the Baptist a far more important man than Jesus himself.<sup>2</sup> In a way, even the Bible paints a more impressive picture of John than of Jesus:

Since there were many things that pointed out John for an illustrious person. In the first place, his distinguished and noble descent; for he was the son of a chief priest. Then his conversation, his austere mode of life, his contempt of all human things; for despising dress and table, and house and food itself, he had passed his former time in the desert. In the case of Christ all was the contrary of this. His family was mean, (as they often objected to Him, saying, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James and Joses?”) (Matt. xiii. 55); and that which was supposed to be His country was held in such evil repute, that even Nathanael said, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (c. i. 46.) His mode of living was ordinary, and His garments not better than those of the many. For He was not girt with a leathern girdle, nor was His raiment of hair, nor did He eat honey and locusts. But He fared like all others, and was present at the feasts of wicked men and publicans, that He might draw them to Him.(St. John

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Juel, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, page 480.

Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, Homily XVI, on John i. 19)

My theme is simply this: It would have been true and fitting if John had affirmed that he was the long-awaited reappearing of mighty Elijah of old. Yet John did not do that. Why?

I do not think the matter was false humility on John's part, but rather the joy within him was so great, that he could hardly bring himself to pause long enough to praise himself. And this is important for you and me, because we have the same cause of joy. There was something before the eyes of John and something on his heart, and his tongue soon let loose his joy:

“I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know,  
<sup>27</sup>even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

And shortly afterwards, his song reaches its crescendo of joy:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.(John 1:29, KJV)

And if the *sin* of the world be taken away, then John is content to bear the *burdens* of the world, as they break upon him, one after another. For John knows something that you and I have the right to know too: that the coming of Jesus means that we will not have lived in vain, that the heartaches and setbacks of these days are not going to render our lives insignificant, that in spite of it all, we are going to win, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fascinating thing for me about John the Baptist is how unchanged and practical was his concrete preaching and manner of life in spite of the fact that he believed that the Messiah had come. Listen, for example, to St. Luke's report on John's preaching:

<sup>10</sup>And the multitudes asked him, “What then shall we do?” <sup>11</sup>And he answered them, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” <sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” <sup>13</sup>And he said to them, “Collect no more than is appointed you.” <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”(Luke 3:10-14, RSV)

In that sense, John the Baptist was like me or most preachers. We cannot change the i.v. tube, nor diagnose, nor treat, but we can stand there and say the thing that changes *everything*: Behold, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world!

When the prophet Isaiah of old was transported to heaven and beheld the LORD, he was pretty much undone by it all, and so he cried out:

<sup>5</sup>Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.(Isaiah 6:5, KJV)

But with John the Baptist, the case is different. He beholds the LORD and in his rapture, he cries out, “Behold, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.” And then he goes on in life. He continues to preach, he continues to teach his disciples, he continues to rebuke sin, until at last wicked Herod beheads him. But there is this difference: As John the Baptist continues his days and his ministry, he does it in the faith that he has seen the King and found him to be good.

And now, so do you and I, for we are about to come forward to the Blessed Sacrament to behold, indeed to touch the very body and blood of our resurrected Lord Jesus. As we do so, let us think ourselves: I am beholding the very Lamb of God, I mean to labor on in the confidence that he will be my great Physician of body and soul, and I mean to enjoy these days ahead of me as best I can, till at last, the dawn breaks, the Son arises in beauty and glory, and I join the angels in the eternal Gloria to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.