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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Matthew 3:1-12
John the Baptist vs. Jesus

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

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it simply “John the Baptist vs. Jesus.” I mentioned to Ann Wilson’s Sunday School class this morning that today’s sermon is about John the Baptist. “He’s great! I said, “But Jesus is even greater!” That pretty much my sermon. We are waiting the birth of Jesus at Christmas time, not of John. At the end of time, we are in the hands of Jesus, not John, and this is good! My sermon title — “John the Baptist vs. Jesus” — obscures the fact that there was a high degree of similarity and mutual respect between John and our Lord Jesus. Still, there are differences between them, and in this sermon I try to search them out.

My beginning text is from our Gospel Lesson. It is Matthew 3:7:

⁷But when [John the Baptist] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

There is more than one way to call people to repentance:

A priest and a pastor from two local churches are standing by the side of the road, pounding a sign into the ground. The sign reads: The End is Near! Turn Yourself Around Now! Before It’s Too Late! As a car speeds past them, the driver yells, “Leave us alone, you religious nuts!” From the curve they hear screeching tires and a big splash. The pastor turns to the priest and asks, “Do you think the sign should just say ‘Bridge Out?’”¹

Perhaps a beginning way to state the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus is that John warned people about the bridge being out, but Jesus made himself into the bridge. At the cost of his own precious body and blood, he made himself into a bridge to heaven.

¹ Website for Saint Brendan Church, A Roman Catholic Community, Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, years ago.

BOTH ARE EARNEST PREACHERS OF REPENTANCE

I mean to return to this proposal later in the sermon. But let me begin by noting a similarity between John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus. The chief thing on my mind is that they are both earnest preachers of repentance. And let me add this personal note: Woe is me on Judgment Day if I mislead you to think that sin is not a serious business. To have souls entrusted to me, but to shepherd people along into thinking that sin is okay: that would be a betrayal of my pastoral office and would leave me out of harmony with John the Baptist and with Jesus.

Both John and Jesus are discontent with the way things are. Both make much ado about matters which might be minor in the eyes of most people or entirely lack standing in the eyes of the laws and the courts, but which mean the world to John and to Jesus because they mean the world to God! John and Jesus both know deep in their bones that God *hates* sin. He does not simply note it, but opposes it with all his being. The ancient words of Jeremiah about the Lord's hatred of idolatry apply to the Lord's hatred of all sin:

...I beg you not to do this abominable thing that I *hate!*
(Jeremiah 44:4, NRSV)

Liturgy combined with injustice in the land just make the Lord mad:

I *hate*, I *despise* your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. (Amos 5:21, RSV)

The robber is earning a divine enemy — even the hatred of the Lord:

For I the LORD love justice, I *hate* robbery and wrongdoing...
(Isaiah 61:8, NRSV)

The tricks of commerce that your boss might reward, simply make God furious:

¹³You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. ¹⁴You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small. ¹⁵A full and just weight you shall have, a full and just measure you shall have; that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. ¹⁶For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an *abomination* to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 25:13-16, RSV)

And the love of money is not simply “the root of all evil,”² but is loathsome in the eyes of the Lord:

¹³...You cannot serve God and mammon.” ¹⁴The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. ¹⁵But he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; for what is exalted among men is an *abomination* in the sight of God. (Luke 16:13-15, RSV)

The perception of sin is not some calm intellectual judgment for the God of the Bible. In theory it *could have been* a calm matter. In theory, our Maker could note our meanness and our sin, but not much care one way or the other. He could remain tranquil in face of sin. But no! Sin is more along the lines of heartache for God. Sin causes great turmoil and anger in the heart of God. Sin so troubles God that he will not abide it. John’s talk of fire, even “unquenchable fire” is not hyperbole. Nor is it untrue to the Bible. The Lord always protests when he sees sin. He remains unreconciled to it. He wants the sinner to repent! And John and Jesus were both good at calling people to repentance.

SPIRITUAL PRIDE

Let me offer you two examples of similarity between John and Jesus as preachers of repentance — both over relatively minor matters in the eyes of the law courts — at least modern law courts. I am speaking of spiritual pride and then of adultery.

The Pharisees should watch out! Both John the Baptist and Jesus target them for the sin of spiritual pride.

Our text this morning, for example, says that representatives of two prestigious groups come to hear John the Baptist: the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Now, the Pharisees were honored among the Jews as being serious people. They were devoted to the law of the Lord. They studied it, obeyed it, and urged others to do the same. I bet they were good neighbors. You would not need to

² 1 Timothy 6:10

worry about locking away your lawnmower, for a Pharisee would not be likely to steal it.

So I bet the Pharisees were pretty surprised by the rough preaching of John the Baptist. He called them a “brood of vipers.” He warned them that they were about to fall, that the ax was already laid to the root of the tree, and that they risked fire, even “unquenchable fire.” This is no way to make friends and gain influence, but John the Baptist did not care about that. He did not want friendship with the Pharisees, but rather friendship with God.

Likewise, it is a Pharisee who gets put down by Jesus in his great parable about the proud Pharisee and the humble publican. The Pharisee is able to point to his good conduct. He does indeed sound like a good neighbor. But that is not enough:

¹⁰Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹²I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

¹³And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: (Luke 18:10-14, KJV)

For both John and Jesus, they know that our God wants people to love him, the Lord, even more than they love a good opinion of themselves. If not, then they should repent.

ADULTERY

Likewise with the preaching of adultery: John and Jesus are on the same page. John’s opposition to the adultery of King Herod ended up costing him his life, for he was beheaded by the King. No matter. The Lord hates adultery and John preached so.

Jesus did the same, to an even higher degree. For Jesus, the Lord requires not only purity of conduct, but also purity of heart:

²⁷Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: ²⁸But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath

committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28, KJV)

Perhaps we can agree about the similarity of John the Baptist and Jesus: they were both earnest preachers of repentance. They wanted people to mend their ways and to walk more in the paths of the Lord. Indeed, when Saint Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus, it is hard to distinguish it from John's. They both call people to repentance:

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15, RSV)

BUT JESUS IS BETTER!

Now, let's search out differences between John the Baptist and Jesus. For this, I find myself seeking help from Saint Paul. Let's begin with the last verse of last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, Romans 13:14:

¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:14, RSV)

You get up in the morning and go through your routines. You make the coffee and breakfast. Maybe you shave and shower. You put on your work clothes and maybe some make up, cologne, or aftershave. But before you head out to work, do not forget to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Like your overcoat, put on Christ. Go off to work decked out in him. Like a spy capable of adopting someone else's appearance and blending in, so put on Christ and mingle among your colleagues and customers as Jesus Christ himself.

Notice, that the apostle does not urge us to "put on John the Baptist." Some people do, you know. I am thinking of subway preachers, for example. God bless 'em! Their hearts are in the right place, I am sure. But they seem to cloak themselves in John the Baptist rather than Jesus. They march up and down the subway car, preaching away. They urge people to repent, they frighten people into repentance. They are stern about repentance, but they offer no help. They might say, "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," but they speak of Jesus as if believing in him were a strategy for avoiding hell and damnation.

But there is more to Jesus than that. I think it would be better if they would simply do what they could to introduce people to their friend Jesus and give some testimony about what Jesus means for them. For what Jesus means for any of us is something very good. It is a whole new world of goodness.

The New Testament is quite certain that there is a difference between the baptism of John and baptism into Jesus. Consider that learned man, Apollos, for example:

²⁴And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. ²⁵This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only *the baptism of John*. ²⁶And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. (Acts 18:24-26, KJV)

Apollos had made a good beginning, but Aquila and Priscilla taught him a more excellent way because they taught him about Jesus.

Another story in Acts helps us farther along by speaking of the Holy Spirit:

¹While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ²And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. (Acts 19:1-6, RSV)

This story refers to our human capacity to take on the spirit of other persons. It is possible to take on the spirit of John the Baptist, but do not do that. He was a great man, even the greatest, but as Jesus said, those in the kingdom of heaven are greater than he:

¹¹Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:11, KJV)

Now, let's return to the little story at the beginning of this sermon — the story about the bridge being out. The essence of repentance for both John the Baptist and for Jesus is that we should ponder what is ahead of us and adjust our lives accordingly. For both John and Jesus, repentance amounts to a kind of coherence between what is ahead of us and how we are living our lives. If the bridge is out, then we should stop. If God hates sin, then we should turn away from it. If judgment looms ahead of us, then we should flee for refuge.

The difference between John and Jesus seems to be our refuge. Where are we to flee to escape the “wrath to come”? John did what lay possible for him. He urged people to find refuge in repentance. He knew that the bridge was out, that there was desperate need to turn around, and so he urged people to do that. He baptized many a person with his baptism of repentance, but he also did what he could to warn them that Someone greater was coming, Someone greater was needed. That one is our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the best way to get to the difference between John and Jesus is to borrow the language of Saint Paul when he was exasperated with the Corinthians. Paul hated the party divisions in the Corinthian church:

¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:11-13, NRSV)

We can close by extending Paul's searching question to John the Baptist: “Was John the Baptist crucified for you?” No, it was Jesus who was crucified for you. Jesus is better than John the Baptist. And that is good, because you and I are in the hands of Jesus. Jesus is the bridge to heaven in a way that John could never be. Jesus is a whole new world and following him is much more than fleeing the wrath to come. It is more along the lines of finding *life* at last in these threescore and ten years granted to us, even abundant life.

Jesus is the Saviour who is willing to share his Holy Spirit with us, and it is to him we should run. It is Jesus we should put on. He will be a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls, and to him belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.