

Introductory

As it was with LW, this reading and its parallels are always read on Advent 2 in the LSB three-year lectionary. John 1:19-28 (but not 29-34) is the reading for Advent 4 in TLH. The focus during the Advent Season is on the Second Coming of Christ. The modern problem, of course, is that long before the First Sunday in Advent rolls around, Wal-Mart are already well on their way towards focusing on the First Coming of Christ, which they see as the best time of the year to make the most money; it's what business does.

It is a thing with which the modern pastor deals in different ways, usually by sooner or later giving in to society and essentially allowing Wal-Mart to dictate the focus of the Church's seasons. Did you get that? Wal-Mart is telling the Church what to talk about in church. Do not let Wal-Mart do that. Hold steady, focus on the Advent theme during the Advent Season, and wait for Christmas until it gets here.

If you don't talk about The Second Coming now, then when? And if you don't talk about it, then don't expect your people to have any sense of urgency about their religion. It may not be a bad idea to say something like that in a sermon; that the World is on one calendar, but we are on a similar but different calendar. That will also give you an opportunity to use that great Dorothy Sayers quote; "Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ." (*Creed or Chaos?* 24-25).

This is a penitential season, and you should also review what that means. It means that it is a season in which we prepare anew for the Second Coming by focusing on change. We look at our lives in the mirror of the Law and see that we fall short and that we must change from focusing on self for salvation, focusing instead on Jesus for salvation. It is that sort of focusing that causes us to grow in faith. As we better understand our own hopeless dilemma, we better understand how good our God is.

Help people out this week by doing a brief review of the Johns, again. This is not John the Apostle. This is John the Baptizer. I do not refer to him as John the Baptist because I don't want people to think that the teaching of the modern-day Anabaptists, legion in the United States, roundly condemned by the Lutheran Confessions, admired and even embraced by Lutherans who do not know their Bibles.

This John, like the other John, is a relative of Jesus and met Him early on, while still in the womb. He knew Him and very likely knew Him well. This John is recognized as the last OT and the first NT prophet. God had not spoken to His People through a prophet since the time of Malachi (ca. 430 B.C.). John comes, and the people recognize him to be sent from God and speaking His Word.

Knowing this, they come in large numbers to hear him preach and to be baptized by him. Jesus also comes, and over His objections John baptizes Him also. John knows who he is, and John knows what his relationship with Jesus is. John is not Jesus, and it is not his job to save anybody. It is his job to point others to Jesus, Who can and does save them. That is also the job of the pastor in our day.

I see too many pastors who don't quite get this and who seem to think it's about them. It's not. It's about Jesus, and anything that the pastor does on Sunday morning that calls attention to himself draws attention away from Jesus and that is a bad thing. It's one of the reasons we wear the clerical and vestments. Pastors need to do their job; direct people to Jesus, who comes in Word and Sacrament.

Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus and then His birth, the wise men, the flight into Egypt, and the return to Nazareth. He would have been a child of seven or thereabouts when the Herod referred to in 2:19 died. Luke relates the account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in Temple, and that's the last we hear about Jesus growing up until now, aged thirty-something.

While what happened in the life of Jesus in the in-between years is clearly not important, because the NT authors don't talk about it, it is also fairly obvious. We can safely say about those years that He led the typical life of a boy and young man in that time and place, and He was sinless, and that would have been noticed by people who knew Him, including John, especially if their mothers were tight, and they may have been.

Textual Notes

1. Matthew introduces us to John like this; “*Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις παραγίνεται – in those days comes*” John the Baptizer. He says that John is “*κηρύσσων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας – preaching in the Judean countryside.*” The verb “*κηρύσσω*” occurs sixty-one times in the NT, mostly in the synoptics, never in John's Gospel, once in Revelation, and several times in the other epistles, and it is the common word for preaching; public proclamation of the Word. The verb is a present active participle; continuous action.

The setting for this true story is said to “*countryside – ἐρημος*” of Judea, a word that appears eight times in Matthew, four of them in reference to this incident, and in 24:26, where Jesus warns that false prophets will be located in the wilderness. The coming temptation, described in chapter four, takes place in the wilderness, and it is the place to which Jesus goes to get away from the crowds who want to make Him a “bread king.” This word is what He calls Jerusalem in His lament for them (23:38).

Besides being a geographical location, the “wilderness” in Matthew is a place where God meets and does battle with Satan. This is especially seen in the temptation account, where Jesus appears to be under attack by Satan in person, but often these attacks take place at the hand of those who work for Satan. We note that Satan here takes the form of Pharisees and Sadducees, who enter the story in verse seven.

Most of the translations use the word “wilderness,” which is misleading, except for the few that use the word “desert,” which is inaccurate. When Americans think of a desert, they think of a very hot, dry, sandy place. When we think of the “wilderness” areas of our county, we think of places like the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area; over a million acres of trees, bears, other assorted animals, and Granolas, which are human – barely – in western Montana.

2. His message is one that should have been familiar; “he was saying ‘repent’ – λέγων Μετανοεῖτε.” The first verb is a participle; continuous action “saying,” and the second verb means to make drastic change, and it is a present imperative; command with connection to the person. The exhortation to repent is not a request to tweak, but a command to become a drastically changed person, which Christians are.

It’s not the first time that a prophet of God had so exhorted Israel and Judah. That’s not to say that they did a whole lot of repenting, but they were familiar with the concept. The words that followed were less familiar, “for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand – ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.” The verb is an indicative in the perfect tense; action in the past with results enduring into the present and future. The event that “has drawn near” is the Kingdom of Heaven in the person of Jesus, who is headed this way.

There is a lot of talk about the meaning of the “Kingdom of God” and the “Kingdom of Heaven” in the NT. There may be nuances, and you can read about them, but the two terms are pretty much synonymous. Matthew is the only synoptic writer who uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven,” and in 19: 23-24 he seems to use them interchangeably.

The parables that Mark and Luke introduce with the phrase “Kingdom of God” are introduced by Matthew with “Kingdom of Heaven.” The people who think that Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, avoids using “Kingdom of God” so as to avoid needlessly offending people who were really touchy about how God’s name should be used, changing it to “Kingdom of Heaven,” are probably right. We would call that euphemism, a figure of speech that we use all the time, often to avoid needlessly offending people.

I use euphemism from the pulpit, often to avoid needlessly offending people. A couple of weeks ago, I was talking about the Resurrection, and about how the Greeks had by the time of Jesus had rejected the idea of bodily resurrection, and about how Paul talked to the nerds on Mars Hill until they heard him mention the Resurrection, and then they said that such teaching is “bird poop.”

I will say “bird poop” here, and in Adult Bible Study, but not from the pulpit. The younger folk might find such talk to be distracting, and the older folk might find such talk to be offensive – whatever that means – so instead, I simply said, “you know how if you leave your car parked under a tree, that’s what they called Paul’s talk about the Resurrection.” That’s euphemism.

3. We note that Matthew, who is writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, will quote a lot from the OT, but Mark and Luke, who are writing to predominantly Gentile audiences in Rome and Greece, not so much. Here, Matthew correctly sees John as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (40:3), John the one who will come to "prepare the way" for the coming Messiah, a thing commonly done for kings and other dignitaries.

As time goes by, following the lead of Mark and Luke, I find myself taking less and less valuable pulpit time to explain the customs and practices of the time, and the fulfillment of OT prophecy. There is something of a preaching and teaching paradox brought on by the fact that Americans of the Twenty-First Century are not First Century Jews; we don't know the OT and the customs and practices of the OT nearly as well as they did, nor are we as familiar with OT Prophecy as they were.

To be sure, OT profs and others will and have pointed out that if you never talk about the OT, then your people will never learn about the OT. To be sure, there are times when a better understanding of the OT will facilitate a better understanding of what is going on in the NT, and there are times when one has difficulty making heads or tails out of a text without at least some knowledge of the OT. I teach the OT in junior and adult Catechism classes, and maybe in a Bible study, and make it supplemental to preaching.

We forget how arduous travel was before the invention of planes, trains, and automobiles. One of the great accomplishments of Rome, and very much a part of the Pax Romana, was the system of roads that linked the empire, including roads in Palestine. I googled "roads in Palestine first century," and surprisingly, was taken to a site that has a map of Roman roads in Palestine in the first century.

<http://urantia-book.org/archive/graphics/mapgif1.htm>

But those roads would not have been there when Isaiah was writing. In Isaiah's day, when a king or other dignitary was headed your way, crews would go out to literally raise and lower the landscape and as best as they could straighten out a road that was going to be traveled by that important person. Jesus is that important person, and John is the one man crew who is preparing the road for Him. Create an analogy in the mind of the hearer here by using a modern example of a similar preparation.

4. We are familiar with the description of John, but the way that he is often depicted, as some sort of a raving, half-mad lunatic nut case is just wrong. That's not to say that there were not prophets who fit that description – Ezekiel was out there – but not in this case. It is supposed that John was something of a hermit or that he was a part of a group called the Essenes, a gathering of hermits, and he may well have been either or both of those things. As far as preaching goes, I don't think it matters a hill of beans.

The description of John is that of a common man, and Matthew is not talking about the more expensive than more ordinary cloth camel hair garments worn today. He's talking about the clothing of a common man in a land with a large camel population, wool from sheep, and not much cotton or polyester. The same thing can be said of the belt that he wore around his waist. Later on, Jesus will remind the disciples of John that they did not go out into the wilderness to see a man clothed in expensive garments.

Nor is the food that he eats either exotic or gross, but it was the sort of food that the common man would commonly eat in that time and place. Bible Scholar Barnes (biblehub.com) has a lot to say about the locust as food, and he says that those bugs are still found in Middle Eastern market places. He points out that Palestine was said to be a land flowing with milk and "honey," which John also ate.

<http://www.jpost.com/Arts-and-Culture/Food-And-Wine/Lunching-on-locusts>

5. It turns out that John was a popular guy, proving that a preacher can be both orthodox and popular. But before you get too excited, recall John's demise. They were "going out to him – ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτόν," an imperfect verb; not a one-time mass exodus, but more like a steady flow, from – smaller to larger – "Ἱεροσόλυμα καὶ πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία καὶ πᾶσα ἡ περιχώρος τοῦ Ἰορδάνου – Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan" to where John was working.

6. We see that people were "ἐβαπτίζοντο ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ – being baptized in the Jordan River by him." The verb "being baptized – ἐβαπτίζοντο" is an imperfect passive indicative; again, a steady flow, not a one-time rush. It should be noted that the verb βαπτίζω (to baptize) is almost always in the passive voice in the NT, a thing received from God, not done towards God.

It being the case that we are surrounded by a great cloud of Anabaptists who demand that we must immerse ourselves as adults or it doesn't count, we must take a moment to talk about the meaning of the verb "baptize." The Greek word is "βαπτίζω," and it means "to wash." What kind of washing are we talking about here? Like the American "to wash," when the Greek word "βαπτίζω" is being used, it depends on what is being washed.

If I'm washing my car, I'm going to spray the water. I'm not going to immerse it. I will though, if washing my coffee cup or the plates with dried egg on them from breakfast, immerse those things. To wash my 30 gallon trash can I will put water in and swish. Spraying will not cut it, and I have no means to immerse. I may wipe off the counter, and bathe or shower, and wash dirty clothes, and wash windows, et al.

In all these things I am said to be "washing" something, but in each case using a different method of washing, which could be described more precisely using another American word. It's the same with the Greek verb used here, and the modern Anabaptists who say that the word always means "to immerse" are just wrong.

If a person in the time of Jesus wanted to wash his bed, he would probably wipe it with a wet rag. If he wanted to wash the 70-gallon containers for wine, he would probably put water in and swish. He would not have immersed those things, but he would likely have immersed drinking cups. The word “βαπτίζω” is used to refer to *each* of those examples of “washing” in Mark 7:4. What does “βαπτίζω” mean? It means “to wash” in a general way. John’s baptizing people has him washing them in a general and non-specific way.

They may have been immersed in the Jordan, but not necessarily. When the Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized by Phillip (Acts 8:36) it was not by immersion. We know that because we know that there was not sufficient water to immerse a person in Gaza. It would have had to be a spring or an oasis. That he “went down” and “came up” must therefore be seen not as going under the water and then coming up out of the water, but may be a technical theological term, an idiom, for Christian Baptism.

Luther was not against immersion, correctly seeing it as a better way to visually teach how the Old Adam drowns and dies in Baptism and the New Adam comes forth. In his day the mode of Baptism would have been considered adiaphora, a thing neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. In our day, with so many Anabaptists demanding that people baptized as infants be re-baptized (“ana” means “again”), as a confessional statement we *cannot* immerse, and we *have to* sprinkle or pour.

People need to know these things, because their Anabaptist friends and family members give them grief and act like they are more spiritual than the Lutherans, and they aren’t, and they need to know how to respond with an apologia for the Gospel. The pulpit is a good place from which to teach them. More time on those sorts of things, and less time explaining things in the book of Leviticus.

They are there on Sunday morning for a variety of reasons, some mixed, and among the reasons for coming to church is that they want to learn, and they want to learn things that are important and useful, and they want to learn things that help them to better understand their religion and others. If they are there on Sunday morning, then you know that their religion is at least somewhat important to them.

For their part, those coming were “ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν – confessing their sins.” These are penitent people who are sorry for their sins, exactly the sort of people who have need – no matter the age – for Christian Baptism. No adult who was not sorry for his sins, who did not want to dramatically change his life, has ever come for Christian Baptism, and neither has any child.

You may have heard me tell the story of Bill, who wanted to be baptized one day after church. He was not a member, but he came with his wife, and one Sunday after church he asked if he could be baptized. I told him about the class, and he asked if we could do it right now, and I told him about the class, and he asked if we could do it right now, and so we did it right now. Bill was a penitent sinner, if I’ve ever seen one.

7. But not all who came to John were in penitent state. We cannot overstate how absolutely odd it is that Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to John to be baptized by him. The ritual act of baptizing was known to the Jews at the time of Jesus, but it was not for Jews like the thoroughly Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees, but only for Gentile proselytes who wanted to join the Jewish religion. Why did these people come to him?

For his part, John had apparently never read *How to Win Friends and Influence Enemies*, and when the theologians journey out of their comfort zone to be baptized by him, they are greeted with a “brood of vipers” blast. Because of John’s greeting, and because he doesn’t seem to have baptized them, we might conclude that they were not penitent sinners, but people very eager to jump onto what must have been the very crowded band wagon that was John the Baptizer.

The Jews have a history with snakes dating back to Adam and Eve, continuing in the wilderness wanderings with Moses et al, and like Indiana Jones, they hated snakes. To call these men “snakes” would have been like addressing Mike Tyson or Michael Jordan with the “n” word. Jesus would call them that and other things during the “Woa” sayings in chapter twenty-four, but don’t you dare call the ELCA “liberal!”

He continues by talking to them about fleeing the wrath to come, much like snakes will flee in the presence of danger, and then he talks to them about the “fruits of repentance.” Just because the prophets warn people to repent does not mean that they will heed that warning. Jesus will later warn his disciples regarding these people to “do as they say, and not as they do.”

8. Repentance, the “change” that we’re talking about, is going to result in a change in the way that we look at all of life, and that change may or may not be noticeable. Use that great metaphor that Luther used in that first Luther movie, the one that won an Academy Award, the metaphor that he got from Jesus, the one that talks about tree and its fruit. I think Luther used an apple tree. Even city people know about fruit trees.

9. John then preemptively speaks to the issue of pedigree. To people like me who are of equal parts Swedish, German, Belgian, and Hillbilly descent, pedigree doesn’t mean much. To the Jews of Jesus’ day, it meant everything. Their warped understanding of the OT was that if you had the correct lineage you were one of the Chosen and if your lineage was not correct you were not.

The main reason they so hated the Samaritans was because they had allowed their blood to be mixed with Gentile blood. Ya, like they had a choice. In their book, for one to be descended from Abraham was really all that mattered. That being the case, for many of them, it was not all that important how you lived your life. These would seem to fit into that category.

They are similar in that regard to The Calvinists, who believe that you are predestined from eternity either to heaven or to hell. That being their belief, you can go either one of two ways; you can try really hard to live right, thereby showing to others, but especially

to yourself, that you are one of the chosen, or you figure that it's a done deal and it doesn't matter how you live, so go for it! Some Lutherans act like Calvinists in this regard. But how much time do you want to spend talking about Calvinists anyway? There are so few of them – about the same number of LCMS – in the U.S. that it hardly seems worth the time and effort.

10. Speaking of trees, a common OT metaphor, he talks about how at the present time “ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ῥίζαν τῶν δένδρων κεῖται – the axe to the root of the trees is applied.” Out on the farm, we use a chain saw, and we do not cut down live trees, and we it would be unthinkable to cut down one of our fruit-bearing trees, but we do cut down dead trees and burn them in the wood stove because that's all they're good for.

11. John talks about his baptism in terms of “βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν – I baptize with water into repentance” and compares it to the Baptism which Jesus will bring by saying that “αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν Πνεύματι Ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρί – He will baptize you with The Holy Spirit and fire.” A lot has been said and written comparing and contrasting the two Baptisms.

Here we note that, according to John, as recorded by Matthew, the two things that his baptism lacked, that the Baptism of Jesus had were the Holy Spirit and fire. Many places in the Bible say that the Holy Spirit is given in the Trinitarian Baptism instituted by Jesus, and in the NT fire means judgment or purification, and here it means both; the repentant who will be baptized with Trinitarian Baptism will be purified.

12. The unrepentant will not be purified, but judged. The picture painted here is a scary one indeed, at least for the unrepentant, like the brood of vipers come out into the country. Again we note that Jesus uses well-known things as metaphor, and here He uses the common scene of the threshing floor to talk about the separation of the wheat (Christians) from the chaff (not).

This text comes up a lot, and I preached from it last spring on The Baptism of Jesus. In this farming community, I talked about how the corn sheller used to separate the corn from the cob from the husk from the chaff, a duty now dutifully performed every fall by the combine. It's called “The Corn Sheller Sermon” on the web site, and people will occasionally mention it in passing.

With the harvest very recently completed, we will probably use the same sort of imagery on this Sunday. In the city we might use things like separating an egg into yolk and white, or point out that the wind blows away the leaves but not the nuts, or you can talk about combines and corn shellers and your people will learn something new, and we all like to learn new things.

Law/Gospel

Un-baptized/Baptized – The person who has not been baptized has not received the gifts of Go offered there. While I would not want to make too much of it because it is not quantifiable, I have noted that people who have not been baptized are different from people who have been, even if the baptized aren't very good Christians. Maybe a listing of all the things that Baptism does and the Bible verses that say those things would be helpful and edifying.

Righteousness Unfulfilled/Righteousness Fulfilled – Because of sin, we are unable to fulfill perfect, or even good righteousness. Jesus does fulfill righteousness perfectly, and since He is identified with sinners and as The Sinner, we are identified as righteous.

Change/Change – It is the natural tendency of the natural man to think that he is the one who is in charge of his salvation by means of doing good things. This is especially the tendency of Christians, especially if they take their religion seriously. It can hardly be helped that the good Christian will compare himself to others and look pretty good in the comparison. It's a good idea that those Christians call themselves "poor, miserable sinners" on Sunday morning.

Unprepared/Prepared – Nobody wants to be unprepared for anything, and especially for something as final as the Second Coming. Our sinful condition makes us decidedly unprepared for that event. Not to worry; God has prepared the Christian. Through Baptism that sinful condition has been dealt with conclusively, and that same Christian is nurtured by God in His Church.

Sermon Titles

Preparing for the King

Two Baptisms

John the Baptizer

About Sinners and Saints

Hymns

Jesus Sinners Doth Receive – LSB 609

On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry – LSB 344

Anything from the *Baptism* section

Anything from the *Advent* section

Nothing from the *Christmas* section, which would be akin to opening your Christmas presents three weeks early.

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