

Introductory

All three synoptics tell us about John the Baptizer, and so does John the Apostle. In TLH, the John Reading (1: 19-28) is appointed to be read on Advent 4. In LW, this reading and its parallels are always read on Advent 2, as is the case with the LSB three-year lectionary. 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 Big Box are already well on their way towards focusing on the First Coming of Christ. We've given it the moniker "The Holiday Season, it starts at Thanksgiving and Halloween is gaining ground, and Big Box accommodates our every need or want.

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 Box 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. Other pastors ignore what The Culture does and talk about what the text talks about.

The focus is going to be on the Second Coming of Christ, which is an important thing to talk about, especially during the Advent Season. If you don't talk about it now, then when? And if you don't talk about it, then don't expect your people to have any sense of urgency about our religion. It may be a good idea to say something like that in a sermon.

This is also a penitential season, and you should review what that means. It means that this 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.

Help people out this week by doing a brief review of the Johns. John the Apostle is writing about 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 modern-day Anabaptists, legion in the United States, roundly condemned by the Lutheran Confessions, have anything to do with John.

This John B 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 the Prophet (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.

When Jesus comes, John baptizes Him. 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. I see 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. Pastors need to do their job; direct people to Jesus, who comes in Word and Sacrament. In doing that, you will be pointing them to Jesus. People should leave thinking mostly about Jesus.

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and then His birth, the wise men, the flight into Egypt, then 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 in Temple. That's the last we hear of Him growing up until now, aged thirty-something.

While what happened in the life of Jesus in the in-between years is clearly not important, 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, He was sinless, and that would have been noticed by people who knew Him, including John, especially if their mothers were tight.

Textual Notes

1. The text gives us no indication about the timing of the start of John's work, "Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις παραγίνεται Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής – in those days comes John the Baptizer." The verb "to come" means more than just motion. It speaks to a deliberate journey to a destination, and when he gets there – he makes quite a splash, doesn't he?

The where and what, "κηρύσσων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας – preaching in the wilderness of Judea." The location "ἐρημος – wilderness." We would say, "out in the country," and it's a word that appears eight times in Matthew, four of them in this pericope. Later on, when Jesus warns of false prophets (24:26), they will be located in the wilderness.

The temptation in chapter 4 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." It is what He calls Jerusalem in His lament (23:38). Besides being a geographical location, the "wilderness" in Matthew is a place where God meets and does battle with Satan.

It says of John that he is "κηρύσσων – preaching," the common word for proclamation of the Word. The verb is a present active participle; continuous action. John did not just preach one sermon consisting of only the words "repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand," and then quote the OT. But that does summarize the content of his preaching.

2. The content is the same as Jesus would later use, “λέγων Μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν – saying, ‘repent, because the Kingdom of the Heavens has drawn near.’” The verb “μετανοέω – repent” means “to change your thinking,” and it’s a present imperative active. John is commanding his hearers to change their way of thinking.

The Lutherans hear talk like that and their synerdar – their synergism detecting device – goes off. We have allowed the Synergists to abscond with this verse and others like it to promote Decision Theology. But words mean something, and that’s what that word means, but John is not a Synergist. It’s an Imperative, and John is preaching the Law.

In fact, it’s rather a harsh command, you can’t do it by yourself. The form here (Present Imperative) is “abnormal...usually focusing upon some special connection between the doer and the action to be done” (FGG 201) commands the hearer to become something he can’t possibly become by himself. That’s the Law. Then John proclaims the Gospel.

The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is “has drawn near.” There is no “hand” in the original, and the verb is in the Perfect tense; past action with results into the present and future. We don’t have a visual, but probably John spoke with his hands like all good speakers do, and you wonder if he was pointing towards Jesus as he said those words.

Does the drawing near refer to time or location? If you look at how that word is used in the NT and beyond, it’s talking about location. He’s talking about the Kingdom moving towards this location. I suppose you could say secondarily that space and time are both moving in the person of Jesus, and as His location comes closer, so does the Kingdom.

3. And there we have it, the definitive answer, as John places Jesus in apposition to the Kingdom, “οὗτος γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ ῥηθεὶς διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου – for this is the one spoken of through Isaiah the Prophet,” and you have to wonder if Jesus isn’t standing right there. The quotation is from Is 40:3, the “Comfort, Comfort” part of his writing.

To stand in apposition means that grammatically the two things are the same thing.

There may even have been a bit of drama as John talked about the imminent appearance of the Kingdom, assuming people didn’t know Jesus to see Him. John preaches, knowing himself to be “λέγοντος Φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ - the voice crying in the wilderness,” the voice whose purpose and function is to prepare the way for that coming Kingdom.

The voice says, “Ετοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν Κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ - prepare the road of the Lord, make straight His path.” The first verb is an Imperative, “to prepare” like you would a meal (22:4), and it’s in the Aorist tense, which is the norm. KJV calls “ὁδὸν – the way,” which is correct, and the LBT who stay with it should not.

In KJV England “way” meant road. Since place names change very reluctantly, there are still scads of roads named “way” in that country. Google map it. Google it in this country, and you get a few roads named “way,” mostly out east and in places of the greatest English influence, almost all of them coupled with “church,” as in “church way.”

The English still talk like that sometimes, but we don't talk that way anymore. When is the last time you referred to a road as "way." So I translate it "road," and Jesus says, "I am the road, the truth, and the life," and Christians were called "The Road," several times in Acts. Dr. Weinrich talked about the meaning of that in his Extension Course - John.

The second verb "make straight" is an Imperative in the Present Tense (sv. 2). It's a different word from "road," the root is "rut" or "track," and refers to a beaten or well-worn path. I think you can still see the ruts from the wagons that traversed the Oregon Trail – some of them over one hundred seventy years ago, or I can look at my driveway.

The translations are mired in Stuart England on this also; LBT.

4. The way John 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. His clothing described was that of a prophet, and his diet was what you would expect of one living "out in the country," like he was.

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, but if that were the case, it seems like something somebody would have said something about. But the manner of his birth was no secret, and word got out about it.

5. And word got out about his preaching, using a series of Metonymy, "Τότε ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν Ἱεροσόλυμα καὶ πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία καὶ πᾶσα ἡ περίχωρος τοῦ Ἰορδάνου – then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the area around the Jordan" River. Not every single person in Jerusalem, Judea, or the Jordan River region came to hear John.

Metonymy is a figure that substitutes a part for the whole or the whole for a part. When we say that The White House said...that structure doesn't talk, and we know that those words are coming from the President. Word got out that the one whose birth was unusual was out over east of the Jordan, out in the country, and he was a pretty fair preacher.

6. Those who did make the journey, "ἐβαπτίζοντο ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν – were being baptized in the Jordan River by him, confessing their sins." The preposition "ὑπό – by" has connotations of somebody of higher rank – John – doing something for people of lesser rank, and the verb is passive.

The Baptism of John – like the later Trinitarian Baptism – is always the passive reception of the thing by the person. Nowhere in Christian theology do we have people baptizing themselves – the Internet mostly says "no" which flies in the face of Decision Theology, which makes the individual fully in control of his relationship with God and Baptism.

They say you can find anything on the Internet, and it's true. Search "baptize yourself," and you get a lot of "no, you can't," and a lot of them even have the right reasons for

saying that! But there's one that says, sure, why not? Like if you don't like big crowds, or what if you were stranded on a desert island by yourself, what are you going to do?

7. It seems just a little bit incredible, doesn't it, that a lot of the Pharisees and Sadducees – the religious experts – were coming for a piece of John's Baptism. They knew all about baptisms, but for dirty people, like the Gentiles. Maybe they knew something we will find out about as this thing plays out. John seems to think they are in need of a little help.

He says to his Seminary Profs, “Τεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς – you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath.” I'm thinking that they did not see themselves fleeing from God's Wrath, but John knew what the future held in store for them, and he lays it on the table for their consideration.

When Jesus brings the hammer down, it is usually these people who are the nails. Jesus does not talk the same way to everybody, and neither should we, and probably we usually don't. But more to the point, John is speaking to their shared belief in the wrath of God coming on the Lord's Day. But they didn't expect themselves to be on the receiving end.

8 - 9. His next words to them indicate that he thinks they aren't acting very much like good Christians, and he commands them to, “ποιήσατε οὖν καρπὸν ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας – do (bear) fruit that is worthy of repentance.” With fruit and tree, the apple tree makes the apple. The apple does not make the apple tree (until you put its seed into the ground).

We must juxtapose this exhortation with the negative command that follows, “καὶ μὴ δόξητε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς Πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ – do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our Father.’” Presumably, John knows them like I know that LCMS – we are both “lifers” in our respective church bodies, and he is a clergyman too.

He knows what they're thinking; they're thinking that they're going to get in because of their ethnicity. That being the case, they don't *have to* act like Christians, and they don't. Their clear and well-known lack of repentance for their well-known and clear sins – Jesus talks a lot about their sins of omission, are the indicator – a lack of fruit – not of belief.

Repentance includes the admission that you have done wrong, and I can't think of anywhere in the NT where this bunch admits to wrongdoing. If you don't recognize your lack of fruit, or your rotten fruit, then you aren't going to change. You aren't going to change your behavior, and their behavior is portrayed consistently in the NT as bad.

Nor are you going to change from trusting in self to trusting in Jesus for your sin problem because you think that you have no sin problem. Sons of Abraham? Not a big deal, “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι δύναται ὁ Θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ – I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham.”

10. Staying with the tree metaphor, “ἤδη δὲ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ῥίζαν τῶν δένδρων κεῖται – Already now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” This is apocalyptic preaching to

people who are not repentant, warning them of the consequences of unrepentance, and those consequences are imminent. The trees represent individuals, and together nations.

The individuals are the people to whom He is directing these words, and the forest is the nation of Israel, as he makes clear at many times and in many places. The axe at the root means that it is about to deal a death blow. The root gets moisture and nutrients to the living tree. Cut off the root, and you kill the entire tree. You can say that in a sermon.

To whom would this apply these days? To the same people it did in those days, and then some. Many who consider themselves Christians don't show much repentance. Many nations, including our own, are drifting – now sprinting – away from God and need to be called to repentance. It is primarily tasked to us who hold the Prophetic Office to do that.

But they aren't listening to me. But do it anyway. When the OT Prophets called people to repentance, how many people do you suppose did not even hear them? Lots. How many people do not even hear what I say on Sunday morning? Lots. But lots do hear what I say, beginning with my flock and anybody who is sitting in church on Sunday.

But it doesn't stop there. Many LCMS churches post sermons on the Internet, including us. Besides that, I have been posting my sermons to www.focusonthegospel.com since 2009. I started recording my sermons in about 2005 to send to my daughter, who lived in other places. Then I wrote a book, and started doing workshops, and needed a web site.

Now I post these notes and a sermon there most weeks, and after thirteen years, there is more traffic than there was at first, with listeners from all over the country and even all over the world. But even when it was only the people on Sunday morning listening, we still preach repentance to people and nations who need to hear it, because it's what we do.

For those who refuse to heed the call for repentance, “πάν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται – every tree not bearing good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,” which is what we who have fruit trees do with a tree that does not bear fruit, and not just any fruit. That fruit has to be tasty and nutritious, or else...

11. When John says “ἐγὼ μὲν ὑμᾶς βαπτίζω ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν – I baptize you with water into repentance,” he means that the symbolic ritual washing must be accompanied by a change in the behavior of the recipient. I know that makes some of the Lutherans uncomfortable, but we aren't talking about Trinitarian Baptism, which will come later.

Meyer says, of the prepositional phrase “εἰς μετάνοιαν denotes the telic reference of the baptism (comp. [Matthew 28:19](#)), which imposes an obligation to μετάνοια,” – to repent.

What's a telic reference?

In [linguistics](#), **telicity** (/ti:'lisiti/; from [Greek](#) τέλος 'end, goal') is the property of a [verb](#) or [verb phrase](#) that presents an action or event as having a specific endpoint. A verb or verb phrase with this property is said to be

telic; if the situation it describes is *not* heading for any particular endpoint, it is said to be *atelic*.

John talks about baptizing with water, which is redundant, to contrast his baptism with the one that will come later, “αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν Πνεύματι Ἁγίῳ καὶ πυρὶ – He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” The locative preposition made up of the preposition “ἐν” followed by a noun in the dative case locates the Holy Spirit in Baptism.

That’s pretty powerful stuff!

12. The one of whom he is speaking, of course, is Jesus, and John is very good at staying in his own lane, recognizing Him to be above him. Switching metaphors now, and speaking of Jesus, John says, “οὗ τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ διακαθαριεῖ τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ - now the winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor.

You can explain what a winnowing fork is, and what a threshing floor is, and the commentaries talk about that. They don’t talk about a combine and a field, but I probably will. It makes the point using the familiar without having to explain the unfamiliar. Even in Iowa, only the oldest of the old remember the days of the thresher and the fork.

It’s about the final judgment, a time of separation, “καὶ συνάξει τὸν σῖτον αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην, τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ - and he will gather his grain into the bin, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” KJV calls the place to store grain a “garner,” and nobody uses that word around here and it may have gone extinct.

The verb survives, barely. The versions that call it a “barn” reveal their ignorance, and would it kill you to do some homework? By homework, I mean ask anybody in the Midwest what you call that round, silver thing you store your grain in, and they will tell you it’s a bin. What’s the red thing over there? A barn. You put your stuff in there.

Around here, most of those bins are filled with corn right now, and some beans. But the chaff, stalks, cob, and the like – they don’t even bring it in from the field. It comes out the back of the combine and you don’t really care where it winds up, because it’s not worth the trouble. In the metaphor before us, the chaff gets burned forever in hell.

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

John and Jesus

Who Gets Baptized and Why

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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