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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Advent 3

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, for all my years as a pastor...

For all the decorated church buildings I have seen and for all the festive homes of church members I have visited during my ministry...

For all the Christmas pageants I have watched or even participated in as a youngster...

For all the holiday decorations I have observed in town squares, in malls, and elsewhere...

For all my experiences with this most blessed of seasons...

There is one character from the story of Advent and Christmas that is conspicuously absent in most Christmas displays.

Sure there are plenty of inflatable Santa Clauses on people's lawns.

Sure there are plenty of Mary's and Joseph's and baby Jesus' displayed on church properties.

Sure there are plenty of angels, and wise men, and shepherds in Christmas pageants.

But very rarely, if ever, do we catch a glimpse of John the Baptist.

I find that strange, don't you?

I mean, John the Baptist is a rather prominent figure in the days leading up to our Christmas celebration.

Indeed, out of the four Sundays in Advent, two Sundays talk specifically about John the Baptist.

Last week, for instance, we heard about how John appeared on the scene admonishing the crowds around him, telling them, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight."

And now today, once again, we observe John the Baptist talking to the crowds about the coming of the Messiah.

Yes, John gets a lot of press in worship in Advent, and yet we don't see him in our holiday festivities.

PAUSE

Maybe it is because of his appearance.

After all, we are told that John the Baptist wandered around the wilderness wearing camel's hair and donning a leather belt around his waist.

Furthermore, we are told that John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey.

From this description we get a picture of John the Baptist as some sort of wild man.

We get a picture of a man with an unkempt appearance.

An uncouth man, unshaven, unbathed, with many weeks' worth of dirt and grime clinging to him.

PAUSE

So, I guess there is no wonder why nativity scenes don't include the figure of John the Baptist in them.

I guess there is no wonder why homes go without a depiction of John the Baptist on their mantel piece among the other holiday décor.

John the Baptist's appearance is bit off-putting.

PAUSE

But that aside, in the ancient world, at the time of Jesus, the person of John the Baptist had become rather popular.

Like Jesus, John the Baptist even had his own collection of disciples.

And because of John's popularity, Biblical scholars believe that the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist may have clashed with each other.

There may have been a great deal of confusion surrounding these two men.

People may have wondered whom they were to follow.

To be sure, at one point in Jesus' ministry, a couple of John's disciples even come to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who is come, or are we to wait for another?"

And the gospel writer John tries to clarify in his gospel the situation surrounding Jesus and John the Baptist.

The gospel writer John does so by having John the Baptist at one point saying, "He (Jesus) must increase, and I John the Baptist must decrease."

So, there must have been quite a bit of confusion with respect to the relevance of John the Baptist and Jesus.

But, if we had to sum up John the Baptist's role, according to the gospel accounts...

If we had to sum up exactly what part John the Baptist played in God's plan...

If we had to sum up the identity of John the Baptist, who he was?

In short, we would say, John the Baptist's role is that of pointer.

For we see in the gospel accounts, it is the John the Baptist who draws the attention of the crowds, it is John the Baptist who directs the eyes of the people toward Jesus because Jesus is the coming Messiah.

In John's gospel account in particular, John the Baptist quite literally says, as Jesus is walking by, "Look, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

And we can almost see Jesus doing one of these...

When John the Baptist says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God," we can almost see Jesus say, "Who me?" and then waving to the crowds.

Yes, John the Baptist is important in the Advent season, because John is the one who draws our attention to Jesus.

And yet, very rarely, if ever, do we encounter John the Baptist in any sort of holiday display.

And it just may be that John the Baptist is just too much of an enigma to include in our holiday displays.

People in general probably can figure out who the angels are, and who the wise men are; and the shepherds and the sheep are pretty self-explanatory.

People obviously know who Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus are.

But if we were to include a figure dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, they might be completely stymied.

The meaning of such a figure would probably be completely lost on the ordinary person, and perhaps even on the faithful Christian.

Outside of Church we don't hear anything about John the Baptist, certainly not in any of the Christmas specials on television.

The meaning of John the Baptist is all but lost, and it is a bit unfortunate, since it is John who points to Jesus.

PAUSE

Today, though, in our present day celebrations of Jesus' birth we do have other symbols that point to Jesus.

Today, we have, for instance, the Christmas tree, which we have in our homes, and which appears in the mall, and in other places all around.

Today we have the Christmas tree to serve as a pointer.

But, like the enigmatic person John the Baptist, do we fully understand the meaning behind the symbol of the tree?

Do we understand why do we put up a Christmas tree in our homes, I mean, besides being a place where we can put all of our presents?

The Christmas tree is meant to be pointer toward Christ.

And interestingly enough, before Christians began using evergreen branches to decorate their homes and before Christians began putting up Christmas trees, ancient pagans were already doing so.

In particular, the Romans used Fir trees to decorate their temples during the festival of Saturnalia.

But why do we still practice this tradition today?

What is the meaning behind the Christmas tree?

How does it point to Christ?

Well, very simply, the meaning is in the name. The tree is called an “evergreen.”

And how it then relates to Jesus is that the evergreen tree represents to us: “life even in the midst of death.”

An evergreen is still green even while nature all around lies dormant.

In the same way, Jesus represents life in the midst of death.

And it is that tree, the cross, that gives the promise of life even though we die. Christ gives the promise of life even in the midst of death.

So, when we are sitting in our home admiring our Christmas tree this season, or when we go to the mall or wherever we may travel and we see a Christmas tree, we are to remind ourselves that that holiday symbol is steeped with significant meaning.

It is meant to point us to the Christ, the one who comes to bring life even in the midst of death.

PAUSE

And while we are at it, let me share with you one other important symbol of Christmas, that being the Christmas stocking.

Again, we may not be aware of why we hang stockings and then fill them with goodies.

Seems again like a strange tradition.

But the tradition is meant again to point us to the message of Christmas.

The tradition stems from a story about a real life man named Saint Nicholas, who was a real life Bishop, who lived in the latter part of the 3rd century and first half of the 4th century.

As an aside, the reason Santa Claus is usually all dressed in red is because Saint Nicholas, from whom we get our Santa...Saint Nicholas had worn the red clothing of a Bishop.

But the story of the Christmas stocking goes like this, that there was once a poor old man who was the father of three daughters.

But it was such that these daughters were unable to be married because there was no money for their dowries.

Saint Nicholas wanted to help but knew the father would not accept help.

So, one evening in secret Nicholas threw three small bags of gold through an open window into their home.

Now, the girls had their stockings hanging by the fireplace in order to dry.

And it so happened that the three bags of gold tossed into the home landed in the stockings, one bag in each girl's stocking.

When the bags of gold were discovered the next morning the girls and their father were overwhelmed with joy, because now they had the money needed for their dowries.

They could be married and live happy lives.

PAUSE

The Christmas stocking then is another example whereby it points to Jesus Christ.

The stockings we hang at Christmas remind us of the charity associated with the season of Christmas.

The stockings remind us of why we give presents to each other.

The stockings remind us that we are blessed and that we are to bless others, that we are to show generosity and good will to strangers and to persons in need.

Indeed, the stockings we hang at Christmas remind us specifically, they remind us specifically of the charity of God.

God is generous to us, to all people, for out of God's great abundance, God gives to us his Son Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

Yes, there are a number of symbols all around us in this holiday season that point to Jesus Christ.

We don't have John the Baptist here in the flesh pointing to Jesus, helping us to pay attention to the coming of the Lord.

No, we don't have John the Baptist, but we do have other symbols of the season.

But we sometimes forget the meaning behind those symbols around us.

The meaning of the Christmas tree.

The meaning of the Christmas stocking.

Symbols are great, but if we don't know why it is we have certain symbols, then those same symbols become POINTLESS.

If we don't know why it is we have certain symbols, then those symbols cease to point to the thing or to the person beyond themselves.

Christmas trees point to Jesus, and his example of life in the midst of death.

And Christmas stockings point to the generosity of Saint Nicholas who in turn points to the generosity of God who gives us his Son at the time of Christmas.

PAUSE

Yes, unfortunately, the meaning of John the Baptist seems to get lost in all that is going on at this time of year.

But John is so very important because he is the pointer.

He is the pointer, who reminds us that we human beings need to have our attention drawn to God in his Son Jesus Christ.

I pray then that in this holiday season, with all of its wondrous symbols and traditions, might draw our attention so that our eyes are fixed on the Savior who is born.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.