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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Advent 3
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and 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, the season of Advent is dominated by the character of John the Baptist.

To be sure, two Sundays in Advent, two Sundays out of four, are devoted to him.

Last week we heard about John appearing in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming a message, saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This week we learn that John the Baptist is in prison, and he seeks word about Jesus, whether Jesus is the one who is come, or if there is another.

Yes, John the Baptist dominates the Advent season.

PAUSE

But, interestingly enough, even though John plays a huge role in the Christian story at this time of year, John doesn't seem to make it into our decorations in the holiday season, does he?

I mean there aren't any nativity scenes that I know of that have John the Baptist in them.

And there aren't any plastic lawn ornaments where we see then John the Baptist standing next to Santa Clause and his reindeer in the front yard.

And there aren't any Christmas cards depicting John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, or which show John sitting by a rock eating a plate of locusts and wild honey.

Although I am not sure how many holiday greeting cards Hallmark would sell if that image appeared on the front.

No, John the Baptist is conspicuously absent from our decorations and Christmas images.

We have wise men. We have shepherds. We have angels.

We have Mary and Joseph standing near a manger in which we find baby Jesus.

We have all of those figures revealed in holiday images, but no John the Baptist.

And I for one have always found that to be rather odd, for like I said, John the Baptist gets quite a bit of press in Advent, leading up to the birth of Jesus.

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Now, truth be told, the figure of John the Baptist probably caused quite a bit of a problem for the early church, as many scholars believe.

For at the time of Jesus, we see that John the Baptist was quite popular in his own right.

Indeed John, like Jesus, had his own cadre of disciples, he had his own gaggle of disciples.

In our reading today, it says that John sent word by HIS DISCIPLES to Jesus, asking, "Are you Jesus, the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

And in addition to his popularity among the crowds of people, John the Baptist may have been in fact something of a mentor to Jesus.

After all we know that Jesus went out to John the Baptist in the wilderness to be baptized by him.

And so then, to compensate for what may have been John's position of authority over Jesus, we hear John the Baptist say in Matthew's gospel, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Furthermore, in John's gospel, we hear John say these words, "He (Jesus) must increase; I (John) must decrease."

The gospel writers then are trying to make sense of John the Baptist and make sense of John's relationship to Jesus.

The close relationship that existed between Jesus and John is all the more emphasized when we see that Jesus' message was the same as that of John the Baptist.

Both declare in their ministry these words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John says these words in Matthew 3:1 at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus in Matthew 4:17 at the beginning of his ministry.

So, indeed, what is going on?

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Well, again, scholars believe that in the ancient world both John the Baptist and Jesus had thriving ministries, and Jesus may have even been a disciple of John the Baptist, but then went off on his own, but the two still had competing, overlapping ministries.

But, when John the Baptist is martyred, killed by King Herod, Jesus rises to prominence to continue the message of John the Baptist and overtime even supersedes that message, such that Jesus reveals himself as God's Son.

PAUSE

Now when all these details were revisited by the early church after the fact, when the relationship of Jesus and John the Baptist was scrutinized after Jesus was crucified and raised again, well then the early church had to somehow come to grips with these two.

And so the early church re-define the relationship between the John the Baptist and Jesus.

And thus we get John as the prophet who appears in the wilderness preceding Jesus and pointing to Jesus as the Messiah.

This is how scholars have come to explain who Jesus and John the Baptist were, as presented in the gospels.

This is how scholars have come to understand how John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus was re-defined.

PAUSE

But what does all this have to do with our Christian Faith today? What bearing does this have for us?

Well, the answer is found in our gospel where Jesus speaks to the crowds.

In verse 7 of today's gospel reading, it says, "Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John."

And Jesus asks, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?"

"What did you go out to see?" "Someone dressed in soft robes?" NO!

"Well then, did you go out to see a prophet?" YES!

PAUSE

Interestingly enough, the gospel writer Matthew does not say that John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus is re-defined by say the gospel writer himself. No.

Nor does Matthew say that John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus is re-defined by the early church. No.

No, instead, the one who re-defines John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus is Jesus himself.

Jesus tells the disciples and us who John is? He is a prophet.

Indeed, it is Jesus, as this text says, it is Jesus who re-defines John the Baptist's identity.

Jesus is the one who re-defines John's identity—not the early church nor the gospel writers.

PAUSE

And this is true of all of us, is it not? This is the message for us today from this gospel reading.

It is Jesus who re-defines every person's identity, because of the relationship Jesus has with all humanity.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus re-defines who we are, too.

PAUSE

Indeed, the Bible is very good at conveying this message.

The Bible is very good at saying one's identity can change, does change at particular times, given certain circumstances.

And this new identity is often captured in name changes.

"Woman" becomes "Eve," because she becomes the mother of all living.

She becomes the mother of us all. And her name literally means "Life Giver."

Woman's identity changes, and so she get a new name.

Abram, meaning "exalted father," becomes Abraham, "father of a multitude," when God changes Abram's identity, such that from Abraham will come all the nations of the earth.

So then, Abraham is indeed the father of a multitude.

"Jacob" becomes "Israel," because from him will come the tribes of Israel.

In the New Testament, Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul, and on and on.

You get the picture.

And even in our own day and age, we also acknowledge changes in identity by a person's change in name.

A man or woman, whatever their previous name, also become known as "dad" or "mom," when they have a child.

A person who is ordained becomes "pastor" or "rabbi" or "imam."

A person who completes their medical training is called "doctor" or "nurse."

A person who elected to public service is called "Senator" or "Congressman" or "Congresswoman," or "Governor."

A person in law enforcement, who wears a badge and carries a sidearm, is called "officer."

Yes, we tend to get a new name to correspond to our new identity.

And again, that is what we witness in our gospel today; John the Baptist is given a new name by Jesus. He is now known as "prophet."

PAUSE

And likewise, Jesus is the one who gives us all a new identity because of who Jesus is in relation to the human family.

Jesus is the Savior, his name means Savior.

His identity impacts then all of our identities, such that we are “saints,” holy ones of God because we have been saved from sin and the power of death, and have the promise of new life.

Our new identity entails holiness, as a saint is holy.

Or, we might also identify ourselves as “angels,” which is a word that means “messenger.”

Because we are “Christians,” we carry the message of the good news of Christ with us, and so we are angels.

We are identified as messengers.

Or, and this is my favorite... because of Christ, we might also identify ourselves as “friends” of Jesus.

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, he says to his disciples, “No longer do I call you servants, but I call you ‘friends.’”

And to be called “friend” in the ancient world was highly significant.

To be called “friend” was what a master might say to his former slave who has been freed, and who is elevated to equal status with the master.

“Friend” was an absolutely radical term in the ancient world, a truly transformative term.

To be deemed one’s friend was of high status to be sure.

And so then for the Son of God to call his disciples “friends” would have been truly mind-blowing.

But this is who we are, says Jesus.

In other words, God in Jesus Christ has liberated us from our bondage to sin and death.

We have been freed from our enslavement, and now God in Jesus Christ has called us “friends,” elevating us to a status equal to that of his own Son.

Talk about radical, talk about mind-blowing.

Our identity is that of friendship with God.

Our identity is that of friendship with the Creator of the cosmos.

Our identity is that of friendship with the one who fashioned the universe.

Jesus re-defines the identity of you and me. We, you and I, are friends of God.

PAUSE

And so here, this is what we see going on in the gospel reading today.

The early church, the gospel writers, didn’t re-define John the Baptist’s identity. Jesus did, because it is written as such into the Word.

And just so, Jesus has re-defined our identity because it is written into the Word; Jesus has identified us as “friends.”

It says so right there in the Bible.

PAUSE

So yes, John the Baptist occupies a big place in the season of Advent.

God had singled him out for the important role of prophet to the Son of God, Jesus the Lord.

And as such, John fulfills his role. John proclaims the coming Messiah.

In a similar manner, you and I have been singled out for an important role. We are saints, angels, and most importantly friends of God.

And we have a role to fulfill; we are called to embrace our identity.

We are called to shine with the light of the season and so then announce that God has freed us all from our bondage to sin and death, because a Savior has come among us.

And this Savior has called us of all things “friends,” and so then has raised us up to such a high status equal to that even of his Son. This is who we are. Loved and honored even as God’s own son.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. AMEN.