

FOCUS: The Good News is we are made righteous through the saving acts of God. (Second in a series)

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our reading from Malachi, we hear the prophet's oracle of the Lord God regarding the coming of the Messiah. In this particular case, it seems that the message is coming not from God, the first person of the Trinity, but from the second—the Son of God—whom we know as Jesus Christ. "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me," we hear.

Of course, the messenger who comes to prepare the way for the coming Messiah is John the Baptizer. Our responsive reading today contained the words of John's father, Zechariah, a member of the priestly class from the tribe of Levi, who gave thanks to God for the gift of a son. Zechariah and Elizabeth were old—older than all of us in this sanctuary this morning. But God blessed them by allowing Elizabeth to become pregnant. God promised to send a Messiah as the savior of his Chosen People. Zechariah, being one familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, knew that a prophet would be sent to announce the coming of the Messiah, and he and Elizabeth both knew, because of the visit of the angel to them, that their son, John, would be that messenger. God's plan for salvation, begun when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden, traveled a long and circuitous route, but it was coming to fruition.

That path would travel through the prophets, like Malachi, to holy men and women like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph, to John the Baptist, who was the cousin of Mary. As Zechariah said in his song of praise in the temple, "He has raised up for us a mighty Savior, born of the house of his servant David."¹ It is this Savior—whom we know to be Jesus—for whom John has been born to be the messenger. John, then, is the messenger of whom the prophet speaks in the reading from Malachi.

God's plan for salvation is not written on the back of an envelope or a paper napkin. It is intentional and deliberate and laid out for us in the canon of Holy Scripture. From the beginning, God has sought out ways to not only be in a relationship with his creation, but to make sure all of his creation has a clue as to what is expected and what is happening. Were it not for human sinfulness, things would have probably stayed nice and simple and we'd all know who Adam and Eve really were as we strolled through the Garden of Eden today instead of trudging through the snow and slush of Beltsville.

¹ Luke 1:69 (NRSV)

But we're not in Eden anymore, and we are still sinful creatures of God's own creation. We need to be saved from our own sinfulness, just like the people of Israel needed to be saved two thousand years ago and the people of twelve tribes needed to be saved several millennia before that. God sent his messengers to the people to tell them what they needed to do, especially when the people drifted away—or flat out turned away from God. One would think that after all these years, we human beings would have figured it out.

But about two thousand years ago, the bearded and camel-hair clad John the Baptizer was moving throughout the land of his own people, calling on them to come and be baptized with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To be baptized is not something that is distinctly Christian. Ritual washing as an act of purification has been known in human society for as long as there has been a record of it. Even in the time of John the Baptizer, converts to Judaism were ritually washed as a part of their reception into the community of believers. Further, the baptism to which John called the people was a “repeatable” baptism. That is, one could come and be baptized as an act of repentance more than once.

John was doing what he was called to do—proclaim the coming of the Messiah to the people. And, in order to make things as smooth as possible for the coming Messiah, not only would the “vall[ies] be filled” and the “mountain[s] and hill[s] made low” and the “rough ways made smooth,” but the people were to come to repent for their sins. And in doing all of these things, then *all* flesh—every man, woman, child, beast of the land, bird of the air, creature of the sea and everything else—would see the promised salvation of God.

Today, as we live together in the much different world of the twenty-first century, we often find it hard to relate to the idea that we need to do things in order to be saved, or that there are expectations placed on us—even those of us who are the baptized children of God. Not only does it run counter to what we *think* it means to be a Lutheran Christian, but it runs counter to our secular world view as well. We are individuals. We have the right to do what ever we please when ever we want as long as it doesn't get in the way of someone else.

Baloney!

No where in the Holy Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions or two thousand years of Christian tradition and history do we find it stated that the baptized children of God can do whatever they please. Yes, in God's plan of salvation, we are made righteous and receive God's grace through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and that grace—our eternal and unrestricted forgiveness of sins—comes to us through the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. However, that grace is not cheap. We are called even now to repent for our sins and seek forgiveness from God, yes, but also from one another. We are called to

reconcile with *every single one* of our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we have become separated, because we are called to live together in peace and harmony with one another. We are called to make disciples of all nations, and to baptize those who have not been baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are called to come to this holy Table as often as we gather together, to eat and drink the precious Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. We are called to prepare the way of the Lord and make his path straight and smooth and level.

Dear sisters and brothers, we have much to do as we travel this life of ours. We don't have time to sit back and let someone else do the work. There are more folks out there who need to hear the Good News of Christ Jesus, and they need to hear more than just the cheery words of the carols blasting through the speakers of their car or the mall. God's plan for salvation is *too good* to keep to ourselves. We are called to share it with every one around us. *You* are a part of God's plan for salvation. *You* are a recipient of God's saving acts and have been made righteous before him because *you* have been baptized into the death and resurrection of *his* only begotten Son, whom he sent into the world not to condemn it, but to redeem it.

John's voice was a lone voice in the wilderness, but it is not the only voice through which God has spoken. And, today is not the only time this Advent season we will hear John's voice calling out to us. Hear his words and ponder them, dear friends. And then, act upon them. It is what we are called to do.