

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

Oh goodie! Today, and again next Sunday, we hear Luke tell his benefactor Theophilus, about the work of John the Baptist. As I mentioned to the Academy students on Thursday in religion class, John the Baptist may well be my favorite Bible character—other than Jesus, of course. Of course, some folks think that John is a tough character—especially tough around the edges—to be so prominent during Advent. After all, aren't we preparing for the cootchy-coo cute birth of a bouncing baby Jesus? Why focus on some gruff young prophet?

Well, how about we start with the honest truth. A bouncing baby boy never saved anyone.

Nope, not a single person was saved by the birth of Jesus. In fact, when we look at the accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, only two of the four Evangelists thought enough of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus to even make a comment about it. Yet, all four include a significant amount of space for the life and ministry of John the Baptist, the cousin of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is there a reason for this?

Well, you all know me well enough by now to know the answer to that question. Yes, there is a reason for the focus on John the Baptist in all four Gospels. John the Baptist, the last of the great Old Testament prophets, has but one task in his “call letter.” His sole purpose in ministry is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. John's task is to proclaim the need for the people of God to change their lives, repent from sin, and prepare to welcome the one who, in John's own words, is so much greater than John that John cannot even tie his shoes.

We hear from the prophet Malachi this morning, too. Malachi, who has the honor of having his prophetic record placed at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Old Testament—tells the people that God will send a mighty prophet into the world before the coming of the day of the Lord. Malachi is speaking to his own people, yes, but to us as well. After the messenger will come the Lord, who will make a real statement in his presence among the people. Malachi asks, “Who among us will be able to stand before the Lord? Who can stand the testing of fire

that the Lord brings to the whole world, seeking out the righteous from the unrighteous, just as a silversmith will heat silver in order to separate the silver from the impurities locked within it?

In the process of refining, the Lord will heat and cool the metal many times, each time making the silver and gold a little more pure. Of course, that metal is not the earthly elements that we wear on our wrists and fingers, but represents the precious beings of God's own creation—you and me and every other human being. Are you ready to stand up to the testing which is to come, asks Malachi. Indeed, who can stand up to the Lord's testing, if even the Levites, the priestly class of the Chosen People, must themselves be purified and reined until they are able to make offerings of righteousness?

Luther, in his commentary on Malachi, reminds us that these words of Malachi are the words of the Lord, and indeed, the words of Jesus Christ. And, unlike earthly kings, the King of Kings is not coming in special robes or with a mighty sword, but as a common man, who will be preceded by one John the Baptist, the messenger of whom Malachi speaks, who will prepare the way and prepare the people to receive Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord of all. Malachi is simply pointing his finger toward John the Baptist, who is to come and point his finger toward Jesus of Nazareth. Like Malachi, it will be John's task to prepare the people for the "refiner's fire."

The work of the Evangelists, in recording the ministry of Jesus for generations to come, was to present the life of Jesus in the context of the people for whom they were writing, and to show how the events and people of their day pointed to Jesus and his purpose for coming as God Incarnate. For example, Luke is writing to a Roman official, Theophilus, who wants to learn more about Jesus of Nazareth. Both Luke and Theophilus are educated men, so Luke is writing his narrative from that perspective. Since Theophilus is either a new Christian or one considering Christianity, Luke goes to great lengths to provide details—especially secular references—to put the ministry of Jesus into a context which

Theophilus will easily understand. This is why we find so many historical references included in Luke's Gospel account.

Even so, Luke understands that what is most important about Jesus and his ministry are the events which show who Jesus is and why Jesus came to earth in human form. In short, it's about salvation. Like most of the other Jewish prophets of the Lord God Almighty, John the Baptist was carrying God's message to the people—Repent, and repent now, before things really get bad for you.

Throughout the history of humankind, God has used His prophets—both men and women—to sound God's clarion call to faithfulness. Normally, God's prophets are calling on the people to repent for previous misdeeds, although there are times, such as during the exilic period in Babylon, when the prophets brought a message of hope and restoration to the Chosen People. John the Baptist brings a combination of the two messages to Israel.

First, he calls on the people to turn from their sinful lives and repent, and as a sign of their repentance, to be baptized. Baptism was a common part of the rite of conversion of Gentiles, but until John the Baptist, Jews didn't baptize Jews. It just wasn't necessary, as there were other signs of inclusion in God's Covenant and other rites of purification. But John the Baptist is calling on all people to repent and receive a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

As we learn from Luke in the second book, the Acts of the Apostles, there is a difference between a baptism of repentance, as John proclaimed, and baptism into Christ. John's baptism was one looking forward, an act of contrition for the past, but more so an act of hopefulness of that which is to come—the Holy One of God coming into the world. John's baptism, then, was a preparation step in faith. Christian baptism, as we practice even to this day, is a baptism into a past action—the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this season of Advent, as we await the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Incarnation of God, we focus our attention—point our fingers, if

you will—in the direction of the risen Christ. Yes indeed, even as we are preparing for the Nativity, our focus is directed upward, to the Cross upon which our Savior, the King of Kings, was nailed and crucified so that we might be made righteous before God once and for all times, and having been made righteous, be able to make our sacrifice of righteousness before God and present offerings to God in purity and righteousness. Having been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we are truly prepared and well-qualified to be tested by the refiner's fire of which Malachi speaks and avoid the fire of which we will hear John the Baptist speak next Sunday.

Make clear the path of the Lord, and prepare yourselves as well, for He is coming. He is coming indeed. Amen.