

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Matthew 11:2-11

What's so great about John the Baptist? I mean, honestly. Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (v. 11). No one! But does anyone really look forward to a sermon on John the Baptist? Not that I have a choice. Today, the Third Sunday in Advent, is basically John the Baptist Sunday. All the readings have to do with him, from Isaiah's prophecy of the voice crying out in the wilderness (Is. 40:1-8), to Paul's caution against rejecting Christ's servants, which, of course, John *was*, being imprisoned and later beheaded for his faithful stewardship of the mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1-5), to the Gospel, which obviously features John the Baptist prominently. There's just no escaping it: I *have* to talk about John the Baptist.

But again, *why*? What's so great about him? Yes, he was a prophet, as Jesus confirms to the crowd (Mt. 11:9). But that's hardly unique. There were *lots* of prophets! Most of the Old Testament was written by prophets: Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk (which is just fun to say), all prophets. And that's just skimming the surface. According to one source,¹ there are approximately 88 prophets mentioned in the Bible, 63 in the Old Testament, 25 in the New, including Anna, Barnabas, and the daughters of Phillip. So it's not even that John was the last or only prophet after Malachi. Ok, well, maybe it was his appearance. Both Matthew and Mark record that John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6). Surely that's it. But, no, it appears that he was only cosplaying the OG prophet Elijah, who *also* wore a garment of camel's hair, with a belt of leather around his waist, and ate off the land (1 Kings 17:6; 2 Kings 1:8). Well, what

¹<https://www.azbible.com/prophets-in-the-bible.html>.

about his message? Matthew says that John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:1-2). But so did all the prophets (the true ones, anyway), and most of them ended up like John: in prison or worse. So, if it’s not what John did, what he looked like, or what he said, then what? What’s so great about John the Baptist?

Jesus goes on, “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and *more* than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare Your way before You’” (Mt. 11:9-10). And there He’s quoting the prophet Malachi, who also says of this messenger, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (4:5). And as Jesus says to His disciples a couple of verses after where our reading ends, John “is Elijah who is to come” (Mt. 11:14). And so John is more than a prophet, he’s the *Messenger of Malachi*, identifiable by his resemblance to Elijah, and with a special task to perform, as proclaimed by his father Zechariah at his birth, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways” (Lk. 1:76). John gets to prepare the way of the Lord. He gets to be the guy who rolls out the red carpet. He’s Jesus’ best man!

Which isn’t *my* metaphor, but listen to what John himself says in John 3: “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” (vv. 27-30). John refers to himself as the “friend of the bridegroom,” who is Christ. Ergo John is the best man. He’s the greatest, not because He’s John the Baptist, but because of his status in relation to the *bridegroom*. Not just anyone

gets to stand next to the groom at a wedding, hand him the rings, make the speech. That honor belongs to the best man alone.

And once he's done his job, it's time for him to get out of the way. "He must increase, but I must decrease." Which is what we see happen with John. He prepares the way of the Lord, makes His paths straight through the preaching of repentance, giving knowledge of salvation to his people in Jesus, and is almost immediately removed from the picture. Jesus increases, but John decreases, all the way down to a prison cell. So he fulfilled his calling. He was a faithful messenger. And to this day we remember him with not one but *two* feast days in the Church Year, his nativity in June (11) and his martyrdom in late August (29). Truly, there is no one greater than John the Baptist.

"Yet," says Jesus, "the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt. 11:11). Greater than John the Baptist. Well, how can that be? How can anyone be greater than the best man, much less one who is "least" in the kingdom of heaven? I looked this up, and the only other place in Matthew (and besides a parallel in Luke, the whole New Testament) where Jesus uses this phrase is in the Sermon on the Mount, where He says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:17-19). So the least are those who know God's Law, His Ten Commandments, but ignore it, or at the very least fail to keep it, and encourage others to sin as well. They have faith in Jesus, for they are still "in the kingdom," but because sin is so dangerous, they flirt with disaster, making provision for the flesh, allowing their hearts to be

weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life (Lk. 21:34; Rom. 13:14). *That* person, says Jesus, is greater than John.

And the reason is, again, because of Christ. John said, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). God our heavenly Father has some amazing gifts to give, not just what we need to support this body and life, but the forgiveness of sins, life everlasting, and rescue from death and the devil. And we all need those things, every one of us, for we are all sinners who fail to keep the Law perfectly. We make provision for the flesh and encourage others to do the same, even if only by keeping silent instead of speaking up to give warning.

But when God lifts up the needy, who ascends the highest? Is it not the one who is least? I hope I'm not stealing too much thunder from next week's sermon, but this is precisely what Mary sings in the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55):

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant...
He who is mighty has done great things for me...
He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

The less you have, the more you receive, which means the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the least, the sinner in need of forgiveness. Now, I'm not saying go out and sin that grace may abound. John told people to bear fruit in keeping with repentance and not to presume on God's kindness, which is meant to lead sinners to repentance (Mt. 3:8-9; Rom. 3:4). In other words, try to live like

you *believe* that Jesus is Lord. But the point is you don't have to be John the Baptist. You don't have to be the best man at the wedding, because you're not: you're the bride! Jesus came to love *you*, to share all that He has with you, to lift you up and sanctify you, having cleansed you by the washing of water with the Word, that He might rejoice in you, His beloved (Eph. 5:25-27). In truth, you will never be as great as John the Baptist, for in Christ you are *greater*.

So don't shy away from the preaching of repentance. The lower you are, the higher you'll rise when the mighty hand of God exalts you at the proper time. And that time is coming soon. So whether it's together with family and friends or alone in a prison cell, rejoice in the Lord always. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. And by grace it has come to you.

I guess John the Baptist's not so bad.

In † Jesus' name. Amen.

SDG

