**John 1:6-8, 19-28 December 13, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of John the 1st chapter here re-reading these words. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Do you remember your first trip to Mackinac Island? I do. Shoved in a van with a bunch of other 7th and 8th graders as we drove north in eager and nervous excitement. We pointed at billboards for Sea Shell City and begged to stop, only to be told there wasn’t enough time. We had to meet up with the rest of the group and ride on the ferry. We boarded the ferry thinking we were on some kind of strange adventure, we were going to a far off place where you couldn’t ride in cars. We didn’t know what to expect. We arrived to find a street of fudge shops all with a different special or deal. We walked to the hotel, we walked to dinner, we walked to the breakout presentations, and worship services, as anyone knows who has been to Mackinac Island, we walked everywhere! These were some of the experiences of my first Michigan Youth Gathering at Mackinac Island growing up. But I also remember the speakers. I remember the music. I remember in particular the Reverend Bill Yonker who would get in front of us and begin, as I am today, telling a story that I thought was completely off the wall and didn’t have anything to do with what we were talking about, or the theme of the event, it was just some guy getting up and telling stories from his life. But he would always end these long illustrative stories by saying, “Now I tell you that….to tell you this….” And he would make the connection. He would piece it all together, how he wasn’t there to talk about himself, or for us to remember all of his personal life stories, but he was there to tell us about Jesus Christ. He told us that stuff, to tell us the important stuff, in order that we would remember it.

In a way, that’s exactly how our Gospel lessons have been the last few weeks. It’s the emphasis behind John the Baptist and his ministry. Why did he come? Not simply for himself or the emphasis being what he said, but he came in order to tell you about Jesus Christ. Why do we study John so much at the beginning of the Church Year and in the season of Advent? Well, we are told about John, so that we can be told about Jesus Christ. John is the precursor, the preparer, and the one who sets up the story, the one who reveals to us the true light that is to come. John tells the crowds of repentance and forgiveness in order that they would be prepared for Jesus. John points to Christ, and we hear about John in order that we may properly understand who Jesus was, and why he came.

We see the concrete evidence of that here in these first verses of John chapter 1. Not only does John 1 talk about how John the Baptist came to bear witness about the light when earlier the Light is referred to as Jesus Christ, but John the Baptist himself explicitly quotes Isaiah when he says “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” ‘Make straight the way of the Lord” as the prophet Isaiah said. The Greek word for “in order that” is repeated 3 times in these short few verses at the beginning of the Gospel of John. Verse 7 says that He (meaning John) came as a witness, *in order that* he may bear witness about the light *in order that* all might believe through him. He was not the light but he came *in order that* he would bear witness concerning this light. In order that. In order that. It’s repeated again, and again, and again, to show that there is a distinct force behind the coming of John the Baptist. In order to show that John’s coming wasn’t by accident but was foretold by angels as we have been reading about in our Advent Devotion books that the Church puts out through Lutheran Hour Ministries, and as we even sing in the Canticle, the Benedictus which appears in one of our liturgies: Morning Prayer “you my child shall be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way” He comes in order that we may believe, it says it right there! He comes to work faith in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. He comes with a message not his own, and tells us the truth *in order that* we find salvation not in John, but instead, in Jesus Christ.

John’s message was important and he worked to destroy the confusion over his coming. We see in later verses of John that there were many who thought that He was Elijah, The Prophet which is a reference to Moses, or even Christ himself. John dispels those rumors and doesn’t point to himself but instead points to Christ, but we may not completely understand what was going on in these verses. After all, John had great fame during this time. Giant crowds were coming out to see him, to meet him, to hear from him, and to be baptized by him. Now we know that John’s entire ministry was done *in order that* the road would be made straight for the coming of Christ, yet the temptation still remained. The temptation to exalt himself and make himself the focus of all that he did. The temptation to believe that all of these people would be saved by his work alone, rather than the work that he was being used for by the Holy Spirit. The temptation to put himself in the place of the Messiah he knew was to come.

The temptation was to make fame and fortune the most important thing in his life, rather than his ministry of preparation. In short, the devil tempted John to create an idol for himself. The devil does the same for us each and every one of us each and every single day of our lives. He works to plant the seeds of greed and selfishness in our minds so that when we do receive recognition and fame, we cling to it. We let it continue, we take the credit, we put ourselves before God. How often have we received recognition, or even just experienced a boom of wealth, resources, or personal glory and thought, “I did this”. “I made this happen, I worked to do all of this on my own” and not given God any of the glory? How often do we fail to return to the Lord all that He richly blesses us with? Or put our possessions and income above God in our lives? Martin Luther writes in the Large Catechism about the First Commandment: What does it mean to have a god? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. An idol of fame and fortune is a god in our hearts when we run to ourselves and focus on ourselves in times of trouble and distress rather than God. Anything that gets in the way of God is an idol and a false god that stands in the way of the Gospel and that is evidence of our rejection of the gifts that God gives us. John’s temptation was to see the work of His ministry as something that He was doing on his own, and something that would lead to his own fame and fortune. We are tempted with the same thing when we think that our accomplishments are done by our own hands and effort and have nothing to do with God who has provided us with all that we have.

The priests and the Levites ask John a simple question. They only ask him “Who are you?” And his FIRST response isn’t “I’m the son of Zechariah the priest” or “I’m the miracle child of the barren and old woman Elizabeth.” His first answer has nothing to do with himself or his accomplishments or his background at all, he simply says. “I am not the Christ.” He destroys the rumors and clears up the confusion that he could be more than he was. John the Baptist was simply a witness. The word used here in Greek is the same word that is used in the threefold emphasis of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod of “witness, mercy, and life together.” The Greek word is marturia. Witness. He was not the Christ he was simply a witness. He came as a witness *in order to* bear witness about Jesus Christ.

We too are witnesses. Eyewitnesses of our depravity and sinfulness. Eyewitnesses of the truth that we need to be prepared for Christ’s coming and we can’t possibly prepare ourselves. Eyewitnesses of the fact that we are easily distracted and seduced away from the clear teaching of Christ. Too often we fall into the same schemes and lies that the false prophets of the world use to tempt us away from the clear and true teaching of Jesus Christ. They tempt us away from the light back into the darkness and confusion of sin. They use the same tactic of telling us one thing, to guide us into learning about another. And soon it’s moved from a simple conversation about our Church to hearing about a new Church, a new leader, a new visionary Christian teacher who doesn’t witness the truth of Jesus Christ but only witnesses the truth about…themselves. Soon we’ve spent a few minutes listening to their message on television, reading about them or watching a video of them on the internet, and we’re hooked to find out more about them rather than Jesus. We learn more about their heart, about the sinful and self-centered things that our itching ears and corrupt hearts long to hear. It’s true we too are witnesses but we are witnesses of the fact that we need a Savior, and that we cannot prepare or save ourselves from our sin.

Which is why we rejoice in the truth that we too have witnessed what John the Baptist has promised. We rejoice in God’s Word where we have witnessed the coming King and Savior of the world. We have celebrated with the shepherds and Mary and Joseph of the babe in Bethlehem throughout our lives, and this year we again are being prepared to welcome and rejoice with the coming King of Israel, the Son of God himself, again on Christmas Day. Yes, even this year, where rejoicing may seem so foreign and strange, where we put up decorations wondering if anyone will see them, where we scale back baking orders and plan meals that are much smaller in comparison to other feasts and gatherings of years past. We are witnesses of years of plenty, and even in 2020, we are witnesses of years of few. Of years of sickness, and isolation, of loneliness and death. But we also are witnesses of Christ, we bear witness of all that we have as coming from him for we know that He sends the rain, He provides the knowledge, He has given us all good things. We are witnesses of his love, and his mercy, and his kindness to us in the times he has graciously blessed us with more, and even in the times when he in His knowledge has given us less in order to draw us closer to him. We thank him for destroying the idols and false prophets and gods that corrupt our heart and lead us astray by firmly rooting us in His Word and strengthening our faith.

John tells us about Christ and our need for repentance, in order that Christ can show us the love he has for the world by fulfilling the prophecies concerning the Messiah in his life. John says emphatically that He is not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not Moses, to point to the one who will come to baptize with more than water but also the Holy Spirit. To point to the one who will come to perform miracles and signs that only God can do. To point to the one who will come with wisdom and knowledge that will turn the focus from ourselves to Him. And finally He tells us to repent in order that we will see our salvation as coming from Christ’s love, when he hung upon the tree and died, in order that we would receive eternal life with him for all eternity.

John the Baptist tells us to repent, *in order that* we would be prepared to receive the Savior of the world and the salvation he earns for our sake. May God bless all of us as we continue to be prepared, here in the last weeks of Advent, by the words of John the Baptist, by the Word of God that shows us the true light of the world, by the decorations and hymns that keep us focused on the true reason for this joyous and festive season, and finally may God bless all of us in our preparation for the final coming of the long awaited Messiah who will take us from the darkness to his light forever. God be with you, bless you, and to Him be all glory, honor, and worship now and forevermore.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.