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Advent 3 One Year Series 2016

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Advent III *Gaudate* December 11, 2016

Advent is a season which gets too little attention. I was pleased to see this reflection on Advent on the First Things website the other day. You might enjoy it as well. Peter Leithart on Advent <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/12/axe-of-advent>

Luther was justifiably proud of his Postil's, especially the postil that he wrote while in the Wartburg and which he updated, re-edited and republished several times during his career. It was likely this third Sunday in Advent which pleased him a great deal. His treatment of Isaiah is typical Luther, smashing left and right at papist foes who obstruct the preaching of Christ. But it is the treatment of the Gospel reading today which soars. I have included a little passage here in which he did a deep dive into Law and Gospel preaching. I encourage you to read the whole section, but here is his treatment of the Gospel:

Luther

The Difference between the Law and the Gospel

24. The second word of God is neither Law nor command and demands nothing of us. But when the first word of the Law has worked misery and poverty in the heart, then He comes and offers us His blessed and life-giving Word. He promises and binds Himself to give grace and help so that we can come out of from such misery, and all sins are not only forgiven but also blotted out, and, in addition to this, love and delight in keeping the law are given.

25. See, this divine promise of grace and forgiveness of sin is properly called the Gospel. And I say here again, once and for all, that you should understand the Gospel as nothing other than the divine promise of His grace and the forgiveness of sins. For that is why it happened that previously Paul's Epistles were not understood and could not be understood, because they did not know what the Law and the Gospel really mean. For they regarded Christ to be a lawmaker, and the Gospel a mere doctrine of new laws. That is nothing else than locking up the Gospel and concealing all things.

26. The word "Gospel" is Greek and signifies "joyous news," because it proclaims the wholesome doctrine of life by divine promise and offers grace and forgiveness of sin. Therefore, works do not belong to the Gospel, for it is not Law; rather, only faith, for it is altogether a promise and an offer of divine grace. Whoever now believes the Gospel receives grace and the Holy Spirit. That causes the heart to rejoice and find delight in God, and then keeps the Law voluntarily, gratuitously, without fear of punishment, without seeking reward, since the heart is perfectly satisfied with God's grace, by which the Law has been fulfilled.

27. But all these promises from the beginning of the world are founded on Christ; God promises no one this grace except in Christ and through Christ, who is the messenger of the divine promise to the whole world. For this reason He came and through the Gospel brought into all the world these promises, which before this had been proclaimed by the prophets. Therefore

there is nothing that anyone (like the Jews) should expect of the divine promises apart from Christ. Everything is drawn together and enclosed in Christ. Whoever does not hear Him hears no promises of God. For just as God acknowledged no law besides the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, so He makes no promises except through Christ alone.

(Luther's Works Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 145-146)

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Why do we implore God to hear us? He has promised this, has he not? Is this because we need to pray? But if that is the case, doesn't that make this into a prayer to us? Is this really an acknowledgment of our own sinfulness, that it is not normal for God to listen to people like us, so just keeping it honest and admitting God should not listen to us and only does so out of mercy and grace? Another way to think about this is to notice that God loves it when we rely on his promises and on him. Begging God to do what he promises is not denying the promises as much as it acknowledges our need for what he has promised.

We implore Jesus to hear our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by his gracious visitation. In discussing this prayer, we thought this sounded sacramental to us. The refreshing and enlightening visitation of God happens in the sacrament. We don't partake of the Lord's Supper just once, checking off that box, and never returning. We go again and again, returning to the enlightenment we need.

The darkness of our hearts should not take a lot of elaboration, but I believe the modern does not recognize it for the darkness that it is. Or worse, we like the metaphor but we have completely forgotten what the darkness actually is. What is the darkness exactly? The word is intended to summarize or dramatically portray something that is bad and contrary to God, whom we acknowledge as light. But what is the darkness? Is it pornography, evil desire, lust, addiction, or greed, jealousy, and something else? When Christ comes and shines his light, what happens to these things? The preacher is called to shine the light into dark places.

He needs to do this because as a culture we are convinced that we are really pretty good, and as a result when someone actually takes a look inside their own heart and discovers just how black it is down there they are often utterly confused by and lost before what they see. Because in our culture we don't recognize that blackness, we don't really have a way for people to deal with it or to prepare them for this. But being a Christian does prepare us for that reality. And so we often are in a position in which we can see people who do some pretty odd things with their darkness. Some of them start to revel in it, challenging the world to call it darkness. Others just bottle it up inside themselves until they cannot bear it any longer but without a healthy way to deal with darkness, they get destructive. The recent rash of school shootings and other headline grabbing incidents seem to reflect some of this. Still others become quietly desperate. They know

that they are profoundly disordered, but they think everyone else is normal. They don't realize that all of us are carrying around the same black heart and every sin, every sickness, every ache, and every night we fall into bed exhausted is proof of it. They believe that they are alone in their condition. They despair.

The Christian has another way to look at this. The darkness is real, but it is not the final truth. Christ's gracious visitation changes the darkness into light. This is where a preacher may need to make some choices to get his sermon manageable. The visitation of Jesus could be today in the sacrament and the Word proclaimed. That would make a great sermon and would have a real Advent theme as the purifying Word and Sacrament of God come and purge our lives of the darkness. This sermon is about the radical transformative nature of the Kingdom. The other visitation we all yearn for is the visitation that is not sacramental in nature, but the revelation of Christ in His glory. It is not sacramental because on that day there will be no hidden form under which we encounter Christ, but we will see the real thing and experience them with our eyes. It will be the same Jesus, but no longer under the forms of bread, wine, water, and our fellow Christians. On that day the transformation will be complete, we will see him as he is because we will be made like him (I John 3:1-3.) On that day all the tears will be dried and the darkness forever banished (Isaiah 25:8.). This second way of talking about the Advent is a sermon about Christian hope and joyful expectation.

Either of these is congruent with the joy theme. The joy of the first sermon is the joy that addict feels when he reaches another milestone of sobriety or being clean. The joy of the second is that expectation that our otherwise unbreakable addiction to sin will one day be broken by the one who wrote our DNA, who understands us better than even ourselves. He will raise our flesh to a life which does not rebel against him. We can hardly imagine such a life, despite Isaiah's vivid portrayal, but that is simply a failure of our imagination. We long for it nonetheless.

Which one will we preach? Can we preach them both in single shot or is that a hopelessly complex task? I tend to think that it is too much for one sermon with the typical congregation's listening skills.

In past we wondered if this prayer is perhaps also able to be understood another way. Are we praying that Christ shines a light into our darkness? Does that enable us to see and realize the darkness and the hidden realities which are masked by darkness? Or is the darkness the problem? Is the darkness really the brokenness of our sinful condition? Is Light the Gospel which dispels the darkness or is the Light the Law which shows us our sin and makes ready the way for Christ the Savior to do something about that sin?

Darkness never dispels light, but light dispels darkness. If you open a doorway between a lit room and a darkened room, the darkness does not diminish the light in the room, but the light drives out the darkness. Darkness is fundamentally a lack of something, light. What is the lack in our hearts which we label darkness?

Readings

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;

say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

This may be one of the most complex pieces of the Old Testament. I don't mean to discourage you with that. This is not inaccessibly complex and there is some absolutely marvelous stuff in here, but don't think you can preach this whole text on Sunday. It simply cannot be done in a week or even a month of Sundays. But there is also enough glorious Gospel in this for a month of Sundays as well. The preacher who struggles a bit with this text will be richly rewarded.

Part of our struggle with the text is that we are living in a prosaic age but this is poetry. Poetry requires us to read and think and meditate. If you have not developed these skills yet, this is a good time to start. You cannot speed read the Bible, despite what my students sometimes think. Even the prose sections require us to contemplate what we are reading and close study pays off huge rewards for the preacher.

"Comfort, comfort" begins the text. (It sounds a little like that cartoon roman guy who advertizes for Little Caesar's, doesn't it? "Pizza, pizza!") The repetition is unusual in the otherwise Spartan Hebrew language. They like parallelism but do not often indulge in this sort of repetition, which should give the interpreter pause. This sort of repetition can be an intensifier. One way the language says "very" is by doubling. Something that is good, good is very good. This could be what is happening here, but I don't actually think so.

Comfort, comfort – what comfort? This is not a lazy-boy recliner sort of comfort. The audience which immediately follows dispels that sort of a meaning. The prophet is told to preach this comfort to a penitent people, the citizens of Jerusalem, ripped from their homes by exile and living in a foreign land not of their choosing. It is important for the preacher to remember here that the people to whom Isaiah addresses these words don't need any help getting into a penitential mood. Having most of your family slaughtered by the Babylonians does that to a person. Their hearts are already stirred up that way. The comfort is that their sins are paid for, their iniquity is pardoned, and their warfare has ended. They have received double from the hands of the Lord.

Here, in these initial verses, is your first great sermon opportunity in this text. Double what, double punishment in the exile? Was the exile sort of a double whammy for the people? Did they get an especially harsh punishment for their sins, an over punishment of sorts? That works. Or is it that they now have gotten a double response from God, he has punished and now has pardoned their sins? Or is it the first words returning at the end of verse two? Is it a double dose of comfort, hence "comfort, comfort." You could easily comfort, comfort your people for a whole sermon just picking that apart. Do a word study on the Hebrew word "comfort" and you will have a lot of fun with that. See where it shows up.

Verses 3-8, the part that intersects most explicitly with the Gospel reading, are the grammarian's nightmare. Hebrew, you must understand, has no punctuation. The closest its gets is an

interrogative “he” (the letter ‘h’) which shows up sometimes when the text seems to be asking a question. But even that is not standard by any means.

The first part introduces a voice crying out. Our editors have understood these verses to be the content of what the voice cries in the wilderness. But it could also be a description of what happens when the voice cries in the wilderness instead of a prescription. The calls for repentance in verse 3. Verses 4-5 could describe that repentance.

One really has to ignore all the punctuation in these verses, or at least recognize that the punctuation is a form of interpretation in itself. Just look at verse 3: A voice crying in the wilderness prepare the path for the LORD. Does that mean we should straighten a path which runs through a wilderness or is the voice out in the wilderness? Depending on where you put the quotes and the commas, it will determine which one you think it to be. Clearly the editor of our text thought the preparation is out in the wilderness, but John the Baptist and the Gospel writers all take this to mean that John’s preaching in fulfillment of this text takes place out in the wilderness. They see the voice out there. (But what do they know, they are only inspired.)

This only gets worse when you come down to verse 6-8: Voice says cry and I said what shall I cry all flesh is like grass and its beauty like the flower of the field Again, depending on where you put the quotes, you interpret the text significantly. The voice says, “Cry out” and I said, “What shall I cry?” that much is pretty clear. The real question is what you do with the next part. Who speaks the lines about all flesh is like grass? Is it God responding to the prophet, telling him what to say? Is it the part about the transitory nature of humanity the content of what he is supposed to cry out? That doesn’t sound very comforting. Or do these words belong to the prophet? Is this the cynical continuation of the prophet after his question? Is he just so exasperated with all the crying out that he has done to no avail?

The following verse complicates things even more. Is this the response of the voice to the cynical prophet? “yes the people are like grass and the grass withers and the flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them but the word of the Lord stands forever” or does the response of the voice begin at “surely” in the third line of this verse? Is it a continuation of the content which the prophet is supposed to cry out? Could it be the poetic form repeating the comfort, comfort of above. We are like grass but God’s Word stands forever. This offers all sorts of sermons to preach, all of them faithful to the text but would need to be backed up with another clearer passage from scripture and should be handled with considerable care. Don’t over state it, the grammar just won’t support you too far on this.

The last section might be more fruitful, the herald is sent up to a high mountain. I think we would put him on satellite TV today. He is to broadcast as far as he can shout that God is coming. He brings his recompense and reward with him and there is a whole sermon in that line too. Then in a complete metaphor switch, God is depicted as a gentle shepherd, gathering the sheep, carrying the lambs in his arms and taking care to lead the ewes with lambs. Any preacher should be able to go to town on that one.

What is the preacher to do with all this? I think you have to figure out what your people need to hear and then pick the part out of this that is most appropriate for them. Here the preacher actually has a great deal of leeway. Even the authors of Scripture take some liberties in interpreting these words of Isaiah. It appears this is a classic locus for “multiple literal meanings” of the text. The Gospel reading picks up on that grammatically challenged part in the middle, so if you want to connect them, you will have to work a little on that.

Here is a little Luther from his commentary on Isaiah, pay particular attention to how he treats the wilderness at the end of this little passage:

Luther

3. *The voice of one crying in the wilderness.* This text is clear to you; it is treated every year and so we may explain it very briefly. *The voice of one crying: In the wilderness preach, etc.* This is how we punctuate the text. Luke (3:4) joins *in the wilderness* with the preacher, John, working in the wilderness. The Jews to the Gentiles. *In the wilderness* is put allegorically. It does not matter. Summary: By this prophecy Isaiah promises a new kind of teaching beyond that which had been in vogue heretofore. For in this way the evangelists being. *The voice of one crying.* It is as if he were saying: “The preaching of the Law was muttering, incomplete and unpleasant to all ears, and produced nothing but hypocrites. But here comes *a voice*, a clear and complete and universal proclamation which purely and joyously and most loudly declares that the warfare is ended and that sins are forgiven.” This is received from a “voice,” that is, through public preaching of the Word. It must be heard and received from a speaking voice. Away with our schismatics, who spurn the Word while they sit in corners waiting for the Spirit’s revelation, but apart from the voice of the Word! They say one must sit still in a corner and empty the mind of all speculations, and then the Holy Spirit will fill it. The sophist also taught this. In vain, however, do we rely on this, and that for two reasons. In the first place, because we are not able to empty our soul of speculations. The devil will provide you with many thoughts. In the second place, because the flesh has not yet been killed in you. When you have heard the Word, you earnestly kill the flesh and empty your soul. It will happen in no other way. No one becomes spiritual without this voice. This is the power of this voice. Away with all Enthusiasts. Take note; The beginning of all spiritual knowledge is this *voice of one crying*, as also Paul says, Rom. 10:14: “How are they to believe...without a preacher?”

The voice of one crying, that is, a new kind of teaching which should be proclaimed everywhere. *In the wilderness.* This voice is sent forth in the wilderness both by the preacher himself and by the hearers. By contrast *wilderness* is placed opposite the teaching of the Law. For like a jail, a wall, and a city, the Law secures and fences us in. The voice of the Gospel, however, is a free wilderness, open to all, public and unrestrained like a wilderness. There is indeed a limitation about the Law, but the teaching of the Gospel is most free and most unrestrained. Hence all these words are as by contrast set against the teaching of the law. *The voice of one crying in the*

wilderness. This voice of the Gospel takes the place of the whispering murmur, which teaches the Law in specified localities. The voice, however, has no definite place and specified localities. This voice, however, has no definite place and teacher. Moses whispers, but the gospel shouts confidently and most vigorously.

(*Luther's Works* Vol. 17. CPH. Pp. 7-8.)

Sermon Idea: The Voice in the Wilderness (That the Holy Spirit would lead the hearer to faithful Advent joy.)

We want to use a literary device today, noting that Isaiah points to a crying out, a voice in the wilderness. We don't want to be too clever with this, but I think we can point to two voices in the wilderness. John will of course be the one who is first spoken of, the fiery forerunner to Christ. But there is another voice in the wilderness, one spoken outside the city walls, on a hill near Jerusalem. This voice spoke of God's great love for all of humanity. "Father forgive them!" it prayed. And then, "It is finished!"

Isaiah saw this as double comfort, and you might just use that doubling of the command to comfort to speak of two voices, both John's which calls us to holy repentance in this season of Advent and Christ's which forgives that penitent sinner. Therein lies the faithful Advent joy to which we are preaching. John's comfort is a little like that of the rod and staff of Psalm 23 in which the rod and the staff of the Lord comfort me, but sometimes with a smack on the head for an errant sheep. It is the word of Jesus which offers the joy-giving comfort. He is the good shepherd who seeks the lost and carries them home rejoicing. He is the one who lays down his life for the flock.

This sermon, picking up on Luther's comments, wants to point the hearer to Gospel which is not constrained – the Gospel which "breaks" the rules. We will define the rules as those things which determine that guilt must be paid for by the guilty and that life must be balanced in the scales of human justice. When that rule is broken in Christ that is liberating. But Luther is also concerned for a gospel which we want to control, which we want to constrain. Too often one might think that the Church is about by-laws and dispute resolution. We limit who can do what, but Luther sees an unruly Gospel, one which shouts confidently and most vigorously but is not specified to localities and certain teachers. Surely he would run afoul of some with these words.

The only way that the preaching of the Gospel does this is out of the confident and joyous relationship which Christ has established in us. The rules are about keeping us from mistakes, but too often they keep us quiet as well. The Gospel shouting in the street will surely make its errors, be misheard, and be a messy affair in general. But it is confident and vigorous because Christ is shouting the good news through us. It isn't so concerned about what others say, it is only concerned that they hear. For the warfare is ended, we have received double from God's hand. The human solutions are like grass and stubble, but the Word of the Lord, Jesus, stands forever.

Sermon Idea: Highway to Heaven (That the Holy Spirit would smooth the way, raising up the low places and bringing low the high barriers, opening the way to heaven's joy for the hearer. Focus on vss 3-5)

This sermon wants to use the pilgrim motif. The Christian realizes that he/she does not entirely belong here. This is not our final home. God is bringing us to a final destination. We want to exercise some caution here. This is not escapism nor is it some gnostic release from the physical world, but it is a journey to a time and place in which all is set right again, the hope of the world is realized in Christ. Close reading of the text shows us that the way is made smooth for God.

The preacher will want to re-define the human life in a way. The journey is ours, undoubtedly, but Isaiah says that God is the one who walks that road. The end of the journey was revealed in baptism when God put a mark on our hearts and heads and claimed us for his own. Through daily contrition and repentance the rough places are made smooth and the low places are brought up and the proud places are brought low. The way is smoothed.

But that becomes something other than a cruel law when we trust that Jesus has already walked that road and promises that he walks it now with us and through us. Isaiah is not talking about us creating a smooth way so we can walk on it. He is proclaiming the highway that God walks on and yet we do as well. In this wonderful mystery we call faith, in which the very sonship of Christ is given to us and he takes our miserable sinful creatureliness to himself. With Paul in Galatians 2:20 we confess that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives through me.

The preacher will want to point to the many ways that Christ smooths the way for us. The sacrament is the food for the journey, but again it is Christ coming to us so we can journey this road with/in him. The community, the body of Christ, are the fellow travelers who make the days and long walks sweeter and better. The Word of God charts the course and offers us encouragement and wisdom.

But ultimately we want to proclaim that Christ is the one who makes this all happen. It will be very easy to fall into the trap of suggesting that we walk this road and leave it there. But this is cruel law and leaves the poor sinner burdened with another to-do list. Isaiah is lifting that burden, not laying on us. Comfort, comfort he exhorts!

Another Sermon Idea The Word of the Lord Stands Forever! (That the discouraged people of God would be encouraged by His gracious promise. (focus on vss 6-8)

The prophet seems to be cynical – he wonders what to preach to a people who are like grass. At Isaiah's day that was really true. They were fading away. The Assyrians had burned all the fortified cities of Judah (Isaiah 38-39). Within a hundred and fifty years the Babylonians would finish the job and the temple would be destroyed and the people sent into brutal exile.

But though the world around them and they themselves seem to be fading away, Isaiah points them and us to a holy promise – the word of God stands forever, the word spoken in our baptism,

the word spoken in absolution, the promise made to the church that it would stand until the day of judgment, and the promise that Christ would be with us to the very end of the age. All these Words of God are true, still true.

This challenges the hearer. We like to think that we are in control of time and the events of this world, but it is not so. We imagine that we have created something durable. We imagine that we will last and our memories will be kept. But it is not so. It really is ephemeral, like grass and flowers. God has given us permission here to be weak, in a sense. He knows it. The people are like grass, and like the flowers of the field they wither and die and the wind blows them away. But the promises of God which he has spoken over them remain true. I will come to the day when I cannot draw that next breath. I will die. I cannot deny this truth. But that grave does not have the last word; that last word belongs to our God who will call me to life.

Psalm 85

LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin. Selah

³ You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

⁴ Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!

⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

⁶ Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷ Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.

⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

The psalm might have been prayed by the person who heard Isaiah's prophecy and turned to God. Will you be angry with us forever? He/she had heard a word of hope but was not feeling the good will of God at this point.

The preacher might be attracted to the final section and beautiful phrase in verse 10. Righteousness and peace kiss one another. Righteousness should occasion war and conflict with all that is unrighteous, including me. God's holiness, His right-ness, can hardly tolerate my sinfulness. John Chrysostom found this enigmatic phrase too good to pass up as have others. The only way that righteousness and peace can kiss is through the cross of Christ. Faithfulness does indeed spring up from the ground and righteousness looks down from the sky at the one who hangs, suspended between heaven and earth.

The Lord is the giver of good things, says verse 12. Our land does yield an increase of the faith which springs up from it. Righteousness goes before him. The Holy Spirit is holy not only because he is holy in and of himself but because he causes things to become holy. He makes things holy. He is the Sanctifier. Jesus death and resurrection has poured out that spirit on us. Is this, in Jesus' words of the Gospel, what make the least in this kingdom greater than the greatest of the OT prophets, John the Baptist? Is it this universal gift of Spirit, no longer limited to the prophet, but now filling all the world? Has this made the way (Jesus) for us?

There is so much here that the preacher could play with. Careful consideration and prayerful association of this text with others will potentially yield wonderful results.

I Corinthians 4:1-5

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.

⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

Luther

1. This Epistle reading give us an example of the Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent (Mt. 21.1-9), where we heard that the disciples did not themselves ride on the colt, but led it to Christ and set Him on it; that is what the apostle does here. The Corinthians were beginning to split apart and to cling to the apostles: one party bragged about St. Peter, another about St.

Paul, another about St. Apollos – each one exalted the apostle by whom he was baptized or taught, or the one whom he regarded as most eminent. Now Paul comes and restrains them, having them brag about no apostle for only about Christ. He tells them that it does not matter by whom they were baptized and taught, but it matters very much that they held to Christ harmoniously and are subject to Him alone. Paul beautifully teaches how the apostles are to be regarded. The whole Epistle reading is a fierce thrust against the papacy and its government, as we shall see.

4. Where could I get such a strong voice to tear the error out of the hearts of all Christians – the error that has penetrated so deeply through the papacy – that they interpret the service of Christ and the service of God to mean nothing else than their own works, which they do without means, against Christ? Now listen, dear man, in St. Paul's "serving Christ" and "serving God" mean principally to carry out an office that Christ has commanded to him, namely, preaching. It is a service which goes from Christ, not to Christ, and which comes not from us, but to us. You must note this carefully, and it is very important, for otherwise you can know nothing about what Paul means with the words *ministerium*, *ministratio ministrare*, etc. He always calls it "to serve," "service," "servant," etc. But he rarely mentions the service which goes beyond them to God, but rather most commonly that which goes among us to people, for even Christ in the Gospel commands the apostles to be the lowest and the servants of others (Luke 22:36).

So that he is understood [as speaking] about this service, he diligently adds, explains himself, and says, "managers or stewards," which cannot be understood otherwise than of the preachers' office.

5. But he calls it the service of Christ and calls himself the servant of Christ because he received that ministry from Him and he was commanded to preach. Thus all apostles and bishops are servants of Christ, that is, Christ's preachers, Christ's messengers, Christ's officials, dispatched to people with His message, so that the meaning of this passage is this: "Let everyone see to it that he does not set up another head nor exalt another lord nor make another Christ, but rather remains altogether with the one Christ. We are not your lords nor your superiors nor your heads. We do not preach about ourselves, we do not teach you our own words, we do not lead you into obeying us, so that you must be subject to us and cling to our doctrine. No, no, rather, we are messengers and servants of Him who is your Superior, Head, and Lord. We preach His Word, carry out His commands, and lead you to obey only Him. That is how you should regard us, and expect nothing else from us, so that, though we are other personas than Christ, you nevertheless do not receive through us another doctrine, another Word, another government, another authority than Christ's. Whoever welcomes us and regard us in that way acts correctly; he welcomes us, but Christ Himself, whom alone we preach. But whoever

does not regard us in that way does us an injustice, abandons Christ, the Head of all, wants to exalt his own head and make idols out of us.”

7...David sings of his own government no differently than if it were God's. He says: “Arise, O Lord, in Your anger; lift Yourself up against the fury of my enemies; help me again toward the office that you have committed to me. Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered to You again, for their sake return on high. The Lord is judge over the people.” (Psalm 7:6-8)

(Luther's Works Vol. 75 CPH. Pp. 113-116.)

Matthew 11:2-10 *I have included some verses prior and following which help contextualize Jesus' words here.*

¹When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

²Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

¹⁷“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

One of the readers forwarded this question regarding the extended reading which he asked us to answer:

Phil: your comments on the Gospel reading do not touch on the most perplexing verses about people entering the kingdom violently (11:12) Could this be Jesus prophetic warning regarding zealots and the violence that was to occur with the uprising ca AD 70 that results in the destruction of Herod's temple? Or Matthew addressing this issue after the destruction of the temple, show how Jesus warned them who would establish the "kingdom" via holy war?

First of all, I think this is a bit of a mysterious verse and I cannot say that I completely understand it. I find it interesting that Jesus says this happens from the days of John the Baptist until the day of his speaking these words. I am inclined to think of Jesus speaking of his own crucifixion here. When he proclaimed that the people should repent because the kingdom of God was at hand, he seems to have meant that it arrived and he was it.

Does he mean to say that the kingdom of God, reduced to one, the Man/God Jesus of Nazareth will be seized and taken by force to a hill where they will kill him? Is that the seizure of the kingdom which happens by violence but which eludes those who violently seize it?

Jesus seems to be saying that something changed when John came. Whereas they had been looking toward it, now the kingdom has come. It suffers violence and men take it by force. I tend to see that as a description of Jesus very peculiar modus operandi – he will be seized and crucified.

I am reminded of the passage in Luke 4 in which Jesus reads the scroll and tells the audience that in their hearing of these words the prophecy Isaiah made is fulfilled. He makes this bold and audacious claim to be the fulfillment of that prophecy. They respond by taking him outside and trying to kill him.

This kingdom of heaven picture now extends throughout this world, especially in times and places where God's Christian people are being attacked to this day, even killed. This is often when the kingdom of God shows up most clearly.

Luther

51. As we have said on the other Gospels – that we should take from them the two doctrines of faith and love, or accepting and bestowing good works – so we should also here praise faith and exercise love. Faith receives the good works of Christ; love bestows good works on our neighbor.

52. First, our faith is strengthened and improved which Christ is presented to us in His own natural works, namely that He associates only with the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the dead, and the poor – which is pure love and kindness toward all who are in need and in misery – so that finally Christ is nothing else than consolation and a refuge for all troubled and weak consciences. Here faith is necessary, which is based on this Gospel and relies on it, never doubting that Christ is just as he is presented to us in this Gospel, and does not think of Him

otherwise nor lets anyone persuade us to believe otherwise. Then surely we have Christ as we believe and as this Gospel speaks of Him. For as you believe, so you will have it. And blessed is he who is not offended by Him.

53. Guard yourself here diligently against offense. Who are those who offend you? All who teach you to do works instead of to believe; those who make Christ into a lawmaker and judge and won't let Him be a helper and a comforter; who frighten you into acting with works before God and toward God in order to atone for your sins and to merit grace...For if you want to believe correctly and truly obtain Christ, then you must put aside all works with which you would act toward God and before God. They are only an offense which leads you away from Christ and away from God. No works are valuable before God except Christ's own work. You must let His work act for you toward God, and do no other work before Him than to believe that Christ is doing His work for you and places it toward God. In this way your faith remains pure, does nothing other than keep quiet, lets Him do good and accepts Christ's work, and lets Christ practice His love on you. You must be blind, lame, deaf, dead, leprous, and poor, or you will take offense at Christ. The Gospel does not lie to you which shows Christ doing good only among the needy.

54. See, this means correctly to acknowledge Christ and to receive Him. That is to believe in a truly Christian way. Those who want to atone for sins and to become godly by their works miss the present Christ and look for another, or at least they believe that he is to do otherwise, that first of all He will come and accept their works and consider them godly. These are, like the Jews, lost forever. There is no help for them.

55. Second, he teaches us to apply the works correctly and shows us what good works are. All other works, except faith, we are to direct toward our neighbor. For God demands of us no other work that we should do for Him than only faith in Christ. With that He is satisfied, and with that we give honor to Him, as to one who is gracious and merciful, wise, kind, truthful and the like. After this think of nothing else than to do to your neighbor as Christ has done to you, and let all your works with all your life be directed to your neighbor. Look for the poor, sick, and all kinds of needy; help them, and let it be the practice of your life, that they are benefited by you, helping whoever needs you, as much as you possibly can with your body, property, and honor. Whoever points you to other good works than these, avoid him as a wolf and as the devil, because wants to put a stumbling block in your way...

57. Therefore see what important words these are: "Blessed is the one who is not offended at me" (vs. 6). In both parts we take offense. In faith, because we undertake to become godly in a different way than through Christ and go our way blindly, not acknowledging Christ. In love we take offense because we are not mindful of the poor and needy, do not look after them, and yet we think we will satisfy faith with other works. Thus we come under the judgment of Christ, who says, "I was hungry and you did not feed me."

(Luther's Works, Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 153-155.)

This reading always occasions an interesting question to which there is no firm answer. Why does John send these disciples? Is he seriously having doubts? That seems inconsistent with what we imagine a prophet is like. He has a word straight from God, he has pointed out Jesus as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, why would he doubt? Some have suggested that his is John teaching his own disciples, getting them to ask the question so they themselves can hear Jesus give the answer. That lets John be the prophet we think he should be but it does rather make him manipulative or at least give the appearance of manipulation. I am also somewhat skeptical of an interpretation whose primary strength is that it makes a Biblical figure easier for me to understand. I find that the Gospel is often embedded in the very things I don't really understand in Scripture all that well. A person who acts in a way that seems irrational to me is often the occasion for God's upside down kingdom to show up.

What do you think? In prior years when we considered this very issue we wondered if this text is really more about us than John. Are we, the reader of the text, cast in the role of the questioner here? Is the last part addressed to the "would be" disciples? Is this the radical Jesus who doesn't fit my labels and categories for a messiah? How surprised will I be on the last day when I see the strange crowd Jesus draws to himself? Will I be shocked to see the sorts that he hangs around with? What did the crowds think of John?

Many have seen that Matthew, writing about 30-40 years after these events he is recording, may be dealing with a group of John's followers who are holding John up as the Messiah, and not Jesus. We know that Paul runs into some of these John followers in the final verses of Acts 18 and the beginning of Acts 19.

The original setting aside, this is a potent affirmation of the reconciliation that is brought to us all. We are all under God's judgment and yet as members of the kingdom, we are all children of God. The littlest child who is still dripping with the waters of her baptism into the kingdom of God is greater than any prophet because Christ's gift to us makes us greater. John did the prophet thing better than any ever did. But that does not make for real kingdom greatness. In being united to Christ in death and resurrection, we are united to God himself. That is the day that prophets of old yearned for, imagined, and spoke about. We are living in it.

If we see John as really having doubts, will we need to explain how that can be? Why? I wonder if we don't sometimes get distracted by these questions from the real point Matthew seems to be making, the answer of Jesus to the questions. I don't need to know why John asked the questions, but I need to hear Jesus' answer to the questions. What is there to learn from John's questioning, if anything? Could it be that John took his own message more literally than we have? When he says that the one who comes after him is ready to pour out fire and cast the unfruitful tree into the fire, did he think that was the primary attribute of Jesus' ministry? If that is what John thought, Jesus did not meet that expectation. He welcomed the sinners, he ate with the prostitutes, and sent them away with "Go and sin no more." He did not let his disciples call down fire from heaven upon the village. He rebuked them. Was John in fact justified in feeling

that Jesus was not meeting expectation? We know that there were many within the Jewish community who rejected Christ for that very reason. He did not look like the messiah they expected to come.

On the other hand, if we see John as instructing his disciples, why does Jesus quote this verse in Isaiah, and not the other places where these sorts of signs of the kingdom show up and it includes “freedom for the prisoner?” John will not get out of prison, at least not with his head attached to the rest of his body. Is John asking the Lord if the prophecies are all true? Is Jesus telling him “yes, but not that you will see this side of heaven? It is true but you won’t see the “get out of jail” prophecy which probably concerns you most.”

Sermon Idea: “Blessed in Christ” (That the hearer would acknowledge Christ in faith and love the neighbor in deed.)

Luther deals with the question of John the Baptist earlier in his Postil, but his explication of the doctrine of faith and works which we reproduce above is just too good to pass up and makes for a very interesting sermon. He works off the proverb-like saying of Jesus at the end of the paragraph: “Blessed is the one who does not take offence at me.”

In typical fashion Luther has leaped over the modern questions of history right into the lives of his contemporaries and us. This might seem like an imposition on the text. He is not really interested in the questions which we think are so important to faithful exposition of the text, but he pushes Christ in all things. He uses the words of Jesus to be a launching point for something profound about us and God. We want to do much the same. Luther has seen two ways in which people take offence at Christ, but they really boil down to the same thing: We can be offended by the graciousness of our God. We can be a theologian of Glory who takes offence at the cross and its message of God’s great love for sinners.

1. The first offense is deny faith itself. We can be offended, like the workers in the vineyard, that God’s merciful love separates completely the reward from the labor. The kingdom is ours, the beautiful, eternal, perfect kingdom of God is ours purely and wholly through the relationship with God established with us when we were baptized. For most of us that is a moment when we were utterly helpless. We were infants. We did not choose, we did not want, we did not crawl to the font, nor did we even confess the faith with our lips that day. We were carried in our parents’ arms and others spoke words for us and God gave you and me the very kingdom of heaven. God does that for people in all sorts of helpless situations, on deathbeds (11th hour conversions), prisons, addiction rehab centers, and under bridges and in homeless shelters. We love to put our good life forward as, at least in part, the cause for God’s love for us. But it just doesn’t work that way. He loves the scoundrel who assumed my identity and stole from me as much as he loves my child, as much as he loves me. When I sing the Kyrie – Lord have mercy, I am getting in line with a really scurvy bunch of people, the lepers, the tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes, and all losers Jesus was always hanging around with in the Gospels. I sing it right before communion because he was always eating with them, and

now he will feed me from his hand. The old many takes offense that God is not counting my good deeds any more than he is counting my sins. When we are offended this way, we will look at the sinner whom we deem to be worse than us and figure that they have to be less loved by God than I am. Surely I don't have to sit by them in the pew. Blessed is the one who does not take this offense. He or she can laugh at the strange upside down kingdom of God in which sinners are forgiven and God's foolishness upends the wisdom of the world.

2. This leads to my second way to be offended by Jesus. All my time in the Sunday school classroom or the church council meeting or mowing the church lawn makes God love me no more or less. God does not think of me as better than the next guy because I am a faithful spouse or a loving parent or pay my taxes. God has changed the equation. God loves me because Jesus died, and that is true for every human being on the planet. This completely changes the way I see my own life. It is no longer some life-long payment to God for heaven, a service rendered to him, but is now the beautiful and joyful expression of that gift given to me. The love of Christ flows into me and through me to my neighbor. Advent is a time to think about the less fortunate in our midst, but indeed every day is for that. For Jesus thought of those people and now his love is in me. My life of loving service is no longer a purchase, it is purchased by Christ and used by him to bring his kingdom to this moment and place. Those offended by Christ will still by coming to him with their good deeds as a purchase, earning their way a bit closer to heaven and his favor. We will cover up our failings and divert attention away from them and to our better points, hoping but not trusting that it is enough. But the one who takes no offense is liberated from that cruel equation. My life, yes with its failing and foolishness is inexplicably the instrument of God to bring his kingdom here, to work his will, to be the loving and gracious God in this moment and in this place.

Thus the blessing which Jesus pronounces on all those who do not take offense at him. They are freed to trust in his love. They don't need to do anything – Christ has done it all, but that then turns their lives into the loving service to neighbor in which Christ is present and working through them. This is blessed, says Jesus.

Another Sermon Idea: Are you the one, or should we keep looking? (That the Spirit of God would fix the eyes of the hearer on Jesus who does all that he promises.)

This sermon will not operate as if John were this hero who sent his disciples to ask the answer to a question he already knew. John was a man, a fallible and sinful man like all of us. He was in prison and may well have been wondering how things could have come to this. Did he misunderstand his own words about the axe laid to the root of the tree and the one who comes to baptize with fire? John is wondering if he should wait for another. His Jesus not met his expectations? We don't know, but it might be? Perhaps, sitting long hours in that cell he was tormented by doubt. Not hard to imagine if you are locked up all alone and in the dark.

Jesus' answer will be the main point of our text, however.

Jesus points his disciples to look around and see what it is that Jesus does and we will do the same today.

The blind see – today if it is a normal day 100,000 new believers are made around this world. People blinded by sin and in the darkness of this world are coming to the light. They see for the first time today.

The lame walk – sin cripples us, it makes our relationships stilted and stunted. We cannot walk, let alone run as God would have us run. But God does amazing things with forgiveness and love. The emotional cripple is given to walk in a new way with neighbor and friend. Jesus has forgiveness and that makes everyone and everything different.

The lepers are cleansed – The amazing thing about Christians communities is that they often find a way to let the outcast in. Lepers were ostracized, but Jesus touched them. He broke those boundaries.

The deaf hear – he is opening our ears to hear this word today, and he opens the ears of countless people today. See the number above – but also look around you. He is opening the ears of people you know to listen to what we say.

The dead are raised – Paul says in Ephesians that we were all dead in our sins – and within a few verses he proclaims that we are not only revived but off life support and doing the good deeds that God has set aside for us to do from the creation of the world (Eph 2:1-10). That is an amazing transformation. We can do real good.

The Poor have good news preached to them – what is absolute but God speaking good news to poor and miserable sinners such as ourselves.

Is he the One? Should we wait for another? He is the One, there is no other!