

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent 3B + December 17, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

Among You

The Word of the Lord from Psalm 85:7: "Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

"Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation." It's another ongoing prayer of the people of God as we await the Lord's advent in glory on the Last Day. You see and you know the wages of sin easily enough and all too often; and the world is full of folks who are trapped in fear and guilt and shame. But you know of Christ; and as you await His return in glory, you know that He has already come in mercy, died for your sins and risen again for your salvation. You've heard, but you haven't seen. But living by faith, you pray, "Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation."

You pray, and the Lord answers. He shows you His steadfast love today: just be sure that you know where to look and what to expect.

In our gospel lesson, the priests and the Levites don't quite know where to look for the Lord and His salvation. They're attracted by the biggest spectacle and the loudest voice when they arrive from Jerusalem. John certainly stands out, and he's drawn a crowd. They know that something big is happening here in Bethany across the Jordan; and since no one besides John is worth a second look, they think perhaps he might be the one.

"Who are you?" they ask, by which they mean, "Are you the Christ, the Messiah?" John doesn't even pretend for a moment, but he gladly confesses, "I am not the Christ."

"What then? Are you Elijah?" They're closer this time, because John is the second Elijah who has come to prepare the way. But he's not the Old Testament prophet raised from the dead, so John replies simply, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?" they persist. Moses said that eventually another prophet like himself would come along; but once again, they're wrong and John says no.

They have to know, because they've been sent to find out. "Who are you?" they ask. "We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replies, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." So there *is* something big going on here, because John confirms that he is the fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah. He prepares the way; and if the prophecy holds true, he prepares the way so that the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

The answer still isn't good enough for the priests and the Levites, though. They're still trying to fit pieces together, and so they ask him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

This time, John's answer is a doozy. He says, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

Wow. Did you catch it? John says, "*Among you* stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me." As the chief priests and Levites see John as their best bet for the Messiah, John tells them that the Messiah is nearby. He's standing among them in the crowd. The Christ is present at the Jordan, and they've managed not to notice Him.

The Messiah doesn't stand out like John. He blends with the all the people as if He's one of them. This also fits with the prophet Isaiah, who said of the Christ that "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him" (Is. 53:2). If you were searching the crowd that day to find the Christ, the Son of God, you would have no more luck than the priests and the Levites. You wouldn't spot a man with extra-broad shoulders and a face framed by a halo and perfect beard. You wouldn't get a special feeling if your gaze locked with His, nor would you sense any sort of power if you brushed up against Him. He is perhaps the most average man in a crowd of average men: He is just like them because He has come to number Himself among them, to be their Savior. He doesn't appear as the stand-out, commanding leader. He arrives as the Servant of all.

So how will the Messiah be revealed? It happens the next day, in the next verse, and it shouldn't surprise you. The next day, John sees Jesus coming toward him and says, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." How do people know who the Christ is, that He has come and that He is present among them? They know because a preacher tells them. They know because John says so. Jesus is made known to the crowd by His Word – not by what they see or what they feel, but by His Word.

They know that He is present. They know that He is Lamb of God. They know that He has come to take away the sins of the world. And what are lambs good for? Getting sacrificed. It's no coincidence that Jesus is baptized there, taking His place with sinners in His baptism so that He'll die with their sins on the cross. It's no coincidence that, back in Isaiah 53 when the prophet has said that Jesus is nothing special to look at, the next thing he says is that He goes from looking unremarkable to looking ghastly: Isaiah says, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not..." and "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:3,7). As John proclaims, He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Remember the prayer from our psalm this day. Remember, "Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation." Because when the Christ is most showing His steadfast love, it looks horrid. It doesn't feel good. To grant us salvation, He's crucified for the sins of the world, rejected by God and man. That's what He has come to do; and greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.

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Christ has died and Christ is risen from the dead. He is ascended into heaven, and He will return in a glorious advent to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day.

In the meantime, He is not far away. He delights to keep visiting His people. He's present with His people in His means of grace. You know this because you've heard it – perhaps from parents, from Sunday school teachers, once or twice (!) from this pulpit: the same Jesus, who was swaddled in the manger and nailed to the cross, is just as present here in His means of grace.

So step back for a moment. Imagine that, somehow, these priests and Levites are sent from Jerusalem to visit Good Shepherd on a Sunday morning. They sit next to you in the pew in order to observe the service. They see one man set apart, not in camel's hair and a leather belt, but in a white robe with what appears to be a purple poncho. They lean over and say, "That's not Elijah or the prophet, is it?" You smile a little at the thought, and you whisper back, "No!" They pause and say, "That's not the

Messiah, is it?" You try not to giggle at the absurdity, and you say, "Not even close ... but the Messiah is here."

It's just then that the sermon becomes really interesting and the whispers fade away, but the priests and Levites are surreptitiously looking around the room to spot the Christ – but nobody fits the bill. They're about to ask you exactly where the Christ is, when you answer the question for them: you stand and you pray what John the Baptist said: "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us!" And where are you facing as you sing this prayer? You're facing a pile of bread and a chalice of wine on the altar. You're talking as if Jesus is to be found there – body, blood and all. You're acting as if He is there in steadfast love to grant you salvation.

You act as if He's there because He is. He is present in His Supper, as in His Word and Baptism, to save. And just like that day by the Jordan in John 1, you don't know He's there apart from the Word. You can't see Him. You can't sense Him. You know He's there because He reveals Himself in the Word.

In our adult information class, I recently gave a retooled lecture with the point that faith walks down a road between two ditches, essentially reason and emotion. If you go off into the ditch of reason, you start to say, "I believe what Jesus says when He makes sense." If you go into the ditch completely, you end up denying things like the virgin birth and the resurrection, because those don't make sense; and you probably tiptoe along the edge of this ditch more than you know. But God's work is greater than what we can understand, and so it is given us sometimes to say, "I believe, even though this doesn't make sense to me."

If you go off into the ditch of emotion, you start to say, "I believe what Jesus says, about both sin and grace, according to how it makes me feel;" or more to our current point, "I know Jesus is near because I feel Him." There are plenty of theologies that operate this way, and it's reflected in worship services designed to appeal to your emotions. Lutheran worship isn't designed to manipulate emotion: it's designed to bring you into contact with Jesus where He promises to be – His Word and His sacraments. That may, or may not, be an emotionally uplifting thing. But either way, Christ is present in His Word, as present as He was in the crowd of our Gospel lesson. It would be easier for us to understand this, perhaps, if He made Himself known in overpowering glory. Instead, He veils Himself in words and water, bread and wine, and says "Here I am."

It's entirely possible for you to reason your way out of those words and say, "That doesn't make sense, and so Jesus isn't really there and must have meant something else." If you find worship here to be tiresome, this might be the temptation at play. On the other hand, you might be tempted to say, "This worship service doesn't do much for me, because I don't feel it." See, it's entirely possible to be baptized after thorough instruction – or to receive Christ's body and blood in the Supper, and to walk away saying, "I really *feel* no different than before I did that." You may confess your deepest secret in private confession, hear the absolution and think, "I thought I'd feel more relief." Or, on the other hand, you may depart from the font or the altar or the confessional totally overjoyed. I'd much rather you depart with joy; but that depends on an awful lot of factors like health and energy level and the overall state of your life. The point is this: ultimately, whatever your emotions, the Lord is faithful. He is faithfully present in His means of grace, just as He has promised. Seek Him elsewhere and you will not find Him, no matter how you feel. Seek Him where He promises to be found, and He is present with grace and steadfast love, no matter how you feel.

Some days, you may depart the altar with a serenity to remind that you are at peace with God. Some days, you may depart troubled because life is full of trouble and its worries easily intrude upon your thoughts; but you depart knowing that you are at peace with God, and that He will deliver you from times of trouble.

You'll always be tempted to look for Jesus where you think it makes sense, or where you feel He is. Repent when you trust them over God's Word; and whatever your mind or emotions tell you, rejoice that Jesus is among His people exactly where He promises to be.

His people pray, "Show us Your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us Your salvation." He hears that prayer, and He answers.

At the font, He responds, "I baptize you."

In, with and under bread and wine, He says, "Eat and drink, My body and blood, for the forgiveness of your sins."

By His Word, He declares, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen