The Baptism of Our Lord, January 12, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of every church year we seem to spend a lot of time with John the Baptist. We get him two Sundays in a row every Advent, the second and third Sundays, and then we always get him again on the Baptism of Our Lord, the first Sunday after the Christmas season ends. So it might seem like there's not much more to say, that we've heard it all by now. But the Gospel of Luke give us a take on John that is worth exploring, because it makes John perhaps more relatable than in any of the other Gospels. Luke's depiction of John also helps us to see the radical nature of what God is doing in Jesus even while God is also working through John. That gives me only two main things to talk about today, for those who are counting, but that also gives a little more time for each.

What's striking about John in Luke is that he is at the same time forceful and humble. John appears in all four of the Gospels as the forerunner of Jesus, the one who "prepares his way," to quote the prophet Isaiah, but I think that none of the others portrays his complexity and contradictions to the extent Luke does. John comes as a spokesman and agent for change. That's what his call for repentance is all about. It is a declaration that things cannot go on the way they are going. Because God is not willing to allow corruption and injustice to continue unchallenged. And I think that this is what made John popular with so many people. One thing we learn from our own election cycles is that we don't have a lot of patience with our elected officials, at least at the highest level. You could say that we too are continually in search of new Messiahs, whom we look to for salvation from whatever crisis faces us, real or imagined, to root corruption and injustice and make life better for people like us. John dared to criticize the local king for his improper relationship with his brother's wife. That information is in the verses that were left out of the middle of our reading today, for some reason. But it wasn't only that. John also raised up other "evil things" that Herod had done, unspecified things, but things we can probably assume were the sorts of things that people with power, wealth, and influence tend to get away with in every age. So when someone is brave enough to take on those sorts of people, that can be very appealing. No wonder people start wondering whether John could be the Messiah. But what they had in mind when they talked about a Messiah was someone who would come in God's name and by God's authority to make their lives better by liberating them from the oppressive powers that be. That ultimately was the Roman Empire, which occupied their land and exploited their labor. But it also included collaborators like Herod, who ruled at Rome's behest and in Rome's interest.

What is remarkable about John, though, is that there is more to him than that. Alongside his boldness and bravery in confronting the status quo is his humility. For some reason John doesn't share the crowd's suspicion that he might be the Messiah. He somehow knows he is not, and that another is coming. And isn't that just a little bit extraordinary? Why not imagine that he could be the one, God's chosen instrument, the savior of his people? What public figure does not want that kind of history-making role? Who wouldn't want to hear how great they are, how important? But John doesn't. He knows he's not the Messiah and he doesn't know who is, only that one is coming. John may have kicked in his mother's womb earlier in Luke when Mary came to visit, recognizing that she was bearing the Messiah. But if John as an unborn baby knew Jesus in chapter 1, he doesn't know him now in chapter 3 as Jesus joins the crowds of people being baptized, or if he knows him as his cousin he does not imagine that he could be the Messiah. (Luke's account here is very different from Matthew's, where John does recognize who Jesus is,

and says that Jesus should baptize *him*, and not the other way around.) And not only does John not know who the Messiah is, he also doesn't imagine that he will not be what he and the crowds expect, or even hope for.

We who are reading Luke's Gospel, though, we do know who Jesus is, and we know that he is the Messiah. But we might still have the same issues of false expectations. As we read through the Gospel – which is our task this year – we will notice that Jesus comes not as a conquering hero, repaying evil deeds with more evil deeds, returning violence and bloodshed with more of the same. His focus instead is on the poor and the afflicted, those who are accounted the least by our usual way of valuing people: those who are sick, who are stricken with blindness, deafness, and paralysis, those who are heartbroken and despairing at the state of the world. It is to these that Jesus goes to proclaim good news. And he makes that good news concrete to their individual circumstances, as signs that God is at work in the world, beneath the radar in unexpected places, to right what is wrong and to disarm the powers of sin, death and evil that have the world in their grip. When John is later arrested and thrown in prison, he has by that time noticed Jesus and begun to wonder whether *he* might be the Messiah. But he isn't sure because of Jesus' unexpected behavior. Maybe John was expecting that the real Messiah would come and break him out of prison. Maybe he was expecting the winnowing fork and the threshing floor, the sorting of the good guys from the bad guys, and the burning of the chaff. Jesus doesn't give John a direct answer, but sends the messengers back to tell him what they have seen: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor have good news brought to them. All of that is what was promised in the prophesies of Isaiah.

We don't know what John thought of that response. And John doesn't get to see how things play out with Jesus, because he will soon be executed. But we do know what Jesus thought of John: "among those born of women no one is greater than John," he says. In other words, John was absolutely right in is call to repentance. He was right in his challenge to corruption, immorality, and all of the evils that we humans inflict on each other. And he was right that God is doing something about that, even if he couldn't quite fathom what that would look like. We get to see what John didn't, God giving the seal of approval on Jesus at his baptism, declaring him to be the beloved, the one in whom God is well pleased. His way is God's way. And we need to bear that in mind as we read through this Gospel of Luke in the next months, following Jesus in his teaching and healing, and in his journey to the cross, where he will take the sin of the world upon himself, to break the never-ending cycles of sin and evil and undoing the ultimate power of death.

That turns out to be great news for John, who was dead by then. But it is also great news for us, over whom death continually casts its shadow, and for whom sin and evil seem to be insurmountable obstacles in our life. John's challenge to those powers is as relevant now as it ever was. And so is Jesus' solution to our impossible predicament. His death and resurrection spell the end of the old and beginning of God's good future for us and the world God loves.

God made a promise to each of us when *we* were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, a promise that we are God's children for Jesus' sake, forgiven and freed for the life we were created to live. And God will fulfill that promises. We can be as confident of that as John the Baptist was confident that a Messiah was on the way. But we can also expect that what that looks like will probably not be what we imagine, or maybe exactly what we want. It will not be a life free from pain and sorrow, or even death. But we have the assurance that in the midst of pain and sorrow and death God is doing a new thing in and through us as the body of Christ in the world, and that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.