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**Saginaw, Michigan**  
**Advent 3 Gaudete (December 16, 2007)**  
**Text: Matthew 11:2-10; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Isaiah 40:1-8**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

May our hearts and minds today consider the words of Jesus found in the Gospel just read  
 “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” (Matthew 11:6)

*Prayer.* Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy believers and kindle in them the flame of Thy divine love, Who has through manifold tongues gathered all the nations of the earth into the unity of faith. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! (Loeche, Seed Grains of Prayer, p.135) Amen.

The character of St. John the Baptist is odd and eccentric. His life lived in the wilderness, he wore camel’s hair and leather belt, and he dieted in locust’s and wild honey. He dies by beheading at the hands of Herod Antipas. His story is bizarre enough, we might even think it came from Hollywood. Indeed Hollywood’s has mimicked the character of John. St. John is to Jesus as Morpheus is to Neo, Proximo is to Maximus, or Qui Gon Jin is to Anakin.

Hollywood’s copies of St. John didn’t get him wrong. The message of John is not in his spectacular personality, his clothing, his lifestyle, or his diet. The message of John is the words from his lips. He is the consummate prophet, the end in the line of Moses.

God put His Word into John’s lips. St. John spoke all that the Lord commanded him. John’s preaching was the very Law of God. The witness of Scripture bears this out, for many came from the region surrounding Galilee to receive his baptism of repentance. His word was the very Word of God which called many to the Jordan.

John is the pinnacle of the Law. His message is one of sin and repentance. The Lord raised him up from the barren womb of Elizabeth to fulfill the promise of the prophets: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” (Malachi 3:1) His preaching of the Law for repentance is the preparation for the preaching of the Gospel that is Christ.

John’s voice cried out in the wilderness “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Is 40:3) His preaching is to lift up the humble and to break down the mountains of pride and selfishness. The rough places caused by our sin are made level and plain. The crooked path of inability to keep the Law is made straight into the path of repentance.

But his preparation is not an end in itself but is to make ready the hearer to receive the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah had prophesied again and again that a savior would come. But this savior would not be received by the prideful and selfish. He would be rejected the haughty and conceited. Those who are comfortable in their life of sin would remain so unto death and hell. And so John preached a stern and unwavering message of death to the sinner. His preaching of the Law left none with excuse. If they rejected God’s prophet they were left to their own sin and to die. If they listened to John and repented, they were left to the grace of God.

But our Lord's intent is not to leave the humbled in despair over the mere possibility of grace. He gives us the promised relief from our tormented consciences and release from our bondage to sin. "Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God [...] will come and save you." (Isaiah 35:4)

John knew that the fulfillment of this promise is Jesus, the Christ. Even within the womb he knew that Jesus had come, leaping for Joy. (Luke 1:41) At the baptism of Jesus "...John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." (John 1:32) He heard the very voice of God the Father say "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased." (John 13:17)

While John believed, he knew others would not. He recognized that many would trust in the act of their repentance and his baptism and not in the grace of God. John knew his very disciples would trust in him only and not fix their eyes upon the greater, Jesus.

Early in his ministry, John said to the Pharisees "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. (John 1:24-27) Now at the end of his ministry, his very last recorded words compel his disciples away from trust in the Law to the grace of God that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

John knew that his end was near. He knew that his preaching had offended Herod Antipas enough to condemn him to life in prison. He could no longer baptize. He could no longer preach. The time had come for John to diminish and for the Messiah to increase. He sent his disciples to Jesus saying "are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" The time was ripe. The disciples of John were prepared for Christ and so he handed them off to the master.

Jesus takes the hand-off and wastes no time, saying: "You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me." (John 5:33-36)

By these works of witness, the spiritually blind receive eyes of faith. We who are incapable of following the way of Christ, are given legs of obedience. Our leprosy of sin is healed in the waters of the Jordan. Our resistant ears are unstopped to hear and obey the Word of God. We who are poor and hungry receive the bread and wine that brings life.

St. John the Baptist's office of prophet was the very office foretold by the prophets of old. For the Spirit of the Lord God is upon him, because the Lord has anointed him to bring good news to the poor." (Is 61:1) John preached repentance in view of the Messiah to come.

The good news is that God had sent his very Paschal Lamb as a sacrifice for the many. Jesus came as sacrifice and priest. He comes as prophet and the prophetic Word incarnate. He is the King and the Kingdom. John's office of prophet reached its culmination in the only true prophet, Christ himself.

God has given great and wondrous signs to testify of His new covenant. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things." (Ps 72:18) Not by the hands of man but by the hand

of God the Father are men, women, and children remade and born again by passing through the Jordan river, on exodus from the wilderness of John to the promised land of God. By the very lips of God's chosen prophets, the whole wisdom of God is uttered forth in truth and purity through the power of His Holy Spirit. His very body and blood is given to multitudes of 4000, 5000 and more for the forgiveness of sins. The dead are given new life with the Father and the Son in heaven.

Our Lord did not end his prophetic office with the preaching of Jesus. The office of prophet continues on at the institution and commission of Christ. It is carried forth to this day by his pastors who equip the saints and build up the body of Christ. It prophesies release from sin, death, and Satan. The office tells of a new heaven and new earth. It speaks of resurrected bodies and renewed souls. John, who was the culmination of the old prepared the way for the fullness of God's prophet in Christ.

A true prophet does not withhold God's Word or temper it for the weak, the faint, or the young. His prophesy is for the maturity in the knowledge of God. For the children of faith are tossed about by every wind of doctrine. (Eph 4:11-14)

Just as John was not a reed shaken in the wind, the prophet of Christ stands firm against the winds that howl and wail for something new and other than Christ and Him crucified for your sins. His teaching does not gain him wealth of popularity, warm bodies in the pew, or increased school enrollment. He does not deform God's Word through deceitful schemes or human cunning. (Eph 4:14-16)

Instead the one chosen by Christ to be his angel delivers to you the truth of your bondage to sin and the freedom won for you to live with God the Father and His Son in the kingdom that will have no end. This truth is the love of God. Upon the true knowledge of the love of God is the church built, her body formed, and her many members acting in concord in the unity of faith.

We heed the call to repentance of the prophets of God. We seek the way, the truth, and the life they proclaim. The messenger like John is not greater than the master Jesus. Nor is the prophet in this place greater than his master Jesus.

Yet, we give them the love and compassion owed to them as if they were our Lord himself. In the words of Jesus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." (John 13:20)

Be dead to the world. Do not judge the prophet by worldly standards but by their stewardship of the mysteries of God. Deny the desires of your heart for a fickle preacher who gives you what your itching ears desire. Our Lord has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, and the like to deliver His message of truth and love to our needful ears.

To many the idea that God can work directly through means is scandalous. That God could work through water to them is a stretch. To deliver His very body and blood in the blessed sacrament defies the imagination. But the ultimate scandal or offense, is the voice of the pastor. That God would chose to utter his Word in truth and purity by the lips of sinful men is utter scandal. Many a mind cannot comprehend this great wonder.

But if the angel Gabriel appeared before you and told you that you were with child, would you believe him? If the angel host spoke of a child being born in Bethlehem and sang “Glory to God in the highest”, would you ignore them and say that you know better? Of course not. So why would you reject the messengers of the new covenant who speak of all the deeds of the Father and Son to you through the same Holy Spirit?

Just as it caused Mary to conceive and bear a child named Jesus, the power of the Spirit working through the Word is no less effective today. God’s Holy Spirit hovers over the baptismal waters, conceiving by His power a new child of God. His words “this is my body and this is my blood for the forgiveness of sins” work the great mystery of the Holy Communion. But His Words by their very proclamation, without any man-made blemish, spot, wrinkle, or change work faith in the heart of the hearer, whether infant in the womb or the increasingly deaf man in the pew.

For the very presence of God which caused John to leap in the womb calls all children to faith. The ears of faith require no intellect or reason to comprehend, no clever illustration to make clear, or simplification to make appropriate.

Our preaching is greater than than St. John for it is the whole Gospel of Christ. We children of faith confess that Jesus is the Lamb of God. We don’t just look ahead to his coming this advent, we receive him and know him as he is present in the breaking of the bread. We have been born not of woman but of water and the Word.

A greater than John has come and His name is Jesus. He prophesied your death and new life in Him. His prophesy tells of the kingdom of heaven, purchased and won for you on the cross of Calvary. We begin with the prophetic voice of John calling “repent! for the kingdom of God is at hand” and we end with his words “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

John came preaching repentance, pointing his finger towards the Lamb who was slain. Jesus preached a life won and redemption given freely by His death and resurrection. The Son has revealed himself in new prophets who prepare the way before us like St. John the Baptist and speak to us the Gospel of Jesus Christ, thus making the lame to walk, lepers cleansed, deaf to hear, the dead raised, and the poor blessed with the gift of heaven. Prepare the way of the Lord! The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken!

Blessed is the one who is not offended by me or the one whom I have sent in my name. Amen.

Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born Of the Virgin Mary, rejoice!  
 It is now the time of grace That we have desired;  
 Let us devoutly return Songs of rejoicing.  
 God has become man, And nature marvels;  
 The world has been renewed By Christ who is King.  
 The closed gate of Ezechiel Has been passed through;  
 Salvation is found there, Whence the light rises.  
 Therefore let our choir Now sing a hymn in purification  
 Let it give praise to the Lord: greetings to our King. Amen