



FIRST LESSON

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11

PSALM

PSALM 126

OR ST. LUKE 1:46B-55

SECOND LESSON

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

PRAYER OF THE DAY

STIR UP THE WILLS OF YOUR FAITHFUL PEOPLE, LORD GOD, AND OPEN OUR EARS TO THE WORDS OF YOUR PROPHETS, THAT, ANOINTED BY YOUR SPIRIT, WE MAY TESTIFY TO YOUR LIGHT; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,
COLORADO 80111

VOICE
(303) 770-9300

FAX
(303) 770-9301

WEB
WWW.STPLC.ORG

Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday in Advent

Date: December 14, 2008

Sermon Title: Testifying to the Light

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

So why are you here this morning? Have you ever given thought to that question? What are we doing here? Or on a broader scale: why do people become involved in a church these days?

**Why Be Involved
at Saint Peter?
VisionQuest Sem.**

I trust by now you have heard about the seminar that is going to take place here on January 9th and 10th, and I hope you are planning to attend. One of the objectives for this weekend together is to take a closer look at our purpose for existing as a congregation, and make some conclusions based on that about what we should be spending most of our time and energy trying to make happen.

Research shows that there are many reasons that people become involved in Christian churches these days – in Lutheran churches these days.

- Some are involved because they sense the church is a place where they can be inspired. They believe that gathering together with a group of people who share their love for God can be a positive influence on the way they are able to live their lives... and their week often goes better if they do.
- Others are seeking community. Maybe they've come from elsewhere, their family is miles away, their neighborhood may not offer everything they need for support and companionship, so they turn to the church. And here they find fellowship — brothers and sisters they can come to think of as their extended family.
- Others worship to be stirred – or, frankly, to be entertained. Maybe they like a good sermon, a lively song, a touching presentation. They simply enjoy the kind of experience an hour of worship can provide.
- Others come out of a nostalgic attachment to the past. They attended a church some time ago, maybe even during their childhood, and they've come back hoping to recapture some of what they have been missing since then. They especially enjoy it when what the church does seems close to what they did in those days.
- Others come because a church can provide an opportunity for service. Many Christians have been moved by our Lord's words about caring for the less fortunate ones in this world, and they join a church to do some of that together.

There are many reasons that people are attracted to churches, and many reasons that they either stay or leave. We hope to take a look at some of these issues at the seminar in January, and I hope you will all consider joining us as we do.

And here's the thing: as we ask the question, "What is this church all about?" we hope to begin looking for answers to another question: "What does God want each of us to be all about?"

**What Does It Mean
to Be a Christian?**



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

From one perspective, that is the question at hand in this morning's Gospel lesson. St. John the

Baptizer is the first person who is covered in all four of our Gospel accounts in the New Testament. He played a very important role in the plan for salvation that God was working out in those days. He was the one who caused the story to have its beginning — both St. John and St. Mark begin their accounts of Jesus' life with John, preaching in the wilderness.

He was a fiery, dynamic preacher — and people came from miles around just to hear what he had to say. Now if you surveyed those people, today's Gospel tells us, you would find that there were many reasons they went out to listen to John preach.

The Mission / Ministry of John

- Some of them thought that he was actually the Christ — the Messiah. They knew of God's promise to send a Savior, and they suspected that the time might be right, so they wondered if John was perhaps that one. If so, they wanted to be front and center when God's kingdom was ushered in. So they made their way out into the desert, to hear what he had to say.
- Others of them thought that he was the prophet Elijah, returned from the dead. In Malachi 4:5, this last book of the Old Testament promises that God will send Elijah back to the people. Many had come to believe that when Elijah returned, the end was immanent, so they traveled out to hear John, and to see if he might be Elijah.
- Others yet thought he was the Prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:15, a part of Moses' farewell address to the people of Israel, just before his death, he shared with them God's promise to send another one like him. Someone, just like Moses, would come to God's people and lead them into the future — and there were quite a few first century people who suspected that John might be this one.

There were a number of interpretations as to just who John was. The leaders of the church cornered him and asked him about these interpretations. John's response to them is an important word: for them, and for us. John absolutely denied being the Christ, or Elijah, or the Prophet. Instead, he described himself as one who came to prepare them for the Christ. He spoke these words:

Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. [St. John 1:27]

John's mission was as clear as his message: his job was to help people see what God was doing in their midst. He was to help them see the light of God that was coming into the world. It was a dark time. They were surrounded by fear, pain, disappointment, disease, brokenness of all sorts... most of all, they were a people who felt unworthy of God and distant from God's presence. John's message was that God was indeed in action among them — about to bring a new light into the world that could overcome their darkness; that could illumine their way; that could put them right with God.

That, of course, is the purpose of this season: Advent. Advent is a season in which we prepare ourselves to welcome the light of Christ into our lives. Sure, we prepare our homes and our family's schedule for the coming of the Christmas celebration. But also, during these months, the tradition of the church calls us to a more intentional discipline of spiritual growth. We worship more often, we read the Bible more regularly, we spend more time in prayer... all of this done, so that our hearts might be prepared to once again receive our Lord. And, prepared for his arrival, that we might be born anew — with a living and growing faith.

The Purpose of the Advent Season

That, also, must be the purpose of any faithful Christian congregation: to help people draw near to God, and be transformed by what God is doing in this world. If you are here to be inspired, that is good. But if that is the only reason, you've missed the central purpose of what we're about. If you are here to experience community and fellowship, that is also good. But if that is the only reason you've come, you too have misunderstood our central purpose. If you are here to be entertained, I suspect that some of what we do will meet your need. But if that's all you want, you'll only experience a fraction of what a church can be. If you are here to recreate your nostalgic vision of what the church was, that may be a noble desire. But if that is your primary reason for belonging to a church, you are missing something much richer. If you are here to discover opportunities for service, that

The Purpose of a Christian Church

too may enrich your life. But if that is your ultimate reason for belonging to a congregation, there is so much more.

John's words point out that the only true purpose for a congregation to exist, is to draw its participants nearer to the Christ who can save them. If inspiration, fellowship, entertainment, tradition, and service help to do that, then that is all the better. But if any of those vehicles through which God works becomes the focus of a congregation, then it will never thrive, because it has lost its center: it is only the church as it works to draw people deeper into the life of faith and the journey of faithfulness.

In this morning's Gospel, John the Baptizer spoke these words:

Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. [St. John 1:27]

May his words become our focus in this Advent season. And may his words also become the focus of our congregation, that through the ministry which takes place on our watch, we might all be drawn ever deeper into a relationship with the God who desires to enter into our lives.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 2, 2009)

Gospel Lesson (English Text): ⁱ

^{1,6} There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. ⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (Greek Text):

^{1,6} Ἐγένετο νθρωπος, ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης ⁷ οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν να μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. ⁸ οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός.

¹⁹ Καὶ αατη ἐστὶν ἡ μαρτυρία τοῦ Ἰωάννου, ὅτε ἀπέστειλαν [πρὸς αὐτὸν] οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἐξ Ἱεροσολύμων ἱερεῖς καὶ Λευίτας να ἐρωτήσωσιν αὐτὸν σὺ τίς εἶ; ²⁰ καὶ ὠμολόγησεν καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσατο, καὶ ὠμολόγησεν τι ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ὁ χριστός. ²¹ καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν τί οὖν; σὺ Ἡλίας εἶ; καὶ λέγει οὐκ εἰμὶ. ὁ προφήτης εἶ σὺ; καὶ ἀπεκρίθη οὐ. ²² εἶπαν οὖν αὐτῷ τίς εἶ; να ἀπόκρισιν δώμεν τοῖς πέμπασιν ἡμᾶς τί λέγεις περὶ σεαυτοῦ; ²³ ἐφη ἐγὼ φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ εὐθύνατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, καθὼς εἶπεν Ἡσαΐας ὁ προφήτης. ²⁴ Καὶ ἀπεσταλμένοι ἦσαν ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων. ²⁵ καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ τί οὖν βαπτίζεις εἰ σὺ οὐκ εἶ ὁ χριστός οὐδὲ Ἡλίας οὐδὲ ὁ προφήτης; ²⁶ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰωάννης λέγων ἐγὼ βαπτίζω ἐν δατι· μέσος ὑμῶν ἐστηκεν να ὑμεῖς οὐκ οοδατε, ²⁷ ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος, οὐ οὐκ εἰμὶ [ἐγὼ] ἄξιος να λύσω αὐτοῦ τὸν ἱμάντα τοῦ ὑποδήματος. ²⁸ ταῦτα ἐν Βηθανίᾳ ἐγένετο πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, ὅπου ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης βαπτίζων. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html

ⁱⁱ St. John 1:6-8, 19-28, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. John 1:6-8, 19-28, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).