

December 9, 2007 – Advent 2 (Feast of Sankta Lucia)  
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park  
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10 / Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 / Romans 15:4-13 / Matthew 3:1-12

Hymn: “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #249)

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Grace to you and peace from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today’s sermon would have been a lot easier if our story about John the Baptist had come from the gospel of Mark rather than the gospel of Matthew. In Mark, John the Baptist is an exciting herald who proclaims the good news of forgiveness from the banks of the Jordan, bringing glad tidings of the King of kings, like the image on the front of our bulletin, adoring God and calling people away from sin with the bountiful waters of baptismal grace. *This* image of John the Baptist is easy to work with and comfortable to believe in. But unfortunately, Matthew tells a different story. John the Baptist, in the story we just heard, is rugged and angry and judgmental, calling down the wrath of a Messiah who will find the unrepentant sinners and burn them to ashes. Repent! You brood of vipers! Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree! The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire! And those of us who know the end of John the Baptist’s story know that it doesn’t get any better—we know that he was imprisoned and beheaded early in his life, before he got to see the fulfillment of Jesus’ life and ministry and death and resurrection. John the Baptist, like the prophet Amos, envisions a world shrouded in darkness, a world in which divine punishment must root out the wicked. There’s no getting around the harshness of this story.

Today’s sermon would also have been easier if I hadn’t dug around so much into the history of Sankta Lucia. The second half of her story is nice—a young woman

adorned in shining white garments, wearing a crown of brilliant lights, who brings food and comfort to the Swedish people during their time of need—this Sankta Lucia is a beautiful Advent herald. Her name means light, and she brings light into the darkness of winter, representing the light that the Christ child brings to our world. *This* image of Sankta Lucia is easy to work with and comfortable to talk about. But the first half of the story tells of the martyr Lucy, who was killed in Sicily in the Diocletian persecutions of the year 304—a young woman who suffered unbearable pain at the end of her short life. As the story goes, Lucy refused to marry a pagan man and instead she gave her dowry to the poor people of her village. So she was tortured and her eyes were gouged out. (If you've ever wondered why there are exactly two raisins in each of the Sankta Lucia buns, it's because they represent Lucy's torn-out eyes!) She was burned with fire, and when the flames failed to consume her, she was beaten and finally beheaded. There is no getting around the harshness and pain in the story of Lucy, our beloved Sankta Lucia, just like there is no getting around the darkness of these cold winter nights—or the reality that we're living in a time of war—or the exhaustion that makes us sick at the end of the academic quarter—or the radical judgment in John the Baptist's message.

Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near. If you came to church this morning expecting joyful proclamation of an angelic baby dressed in soft robes, with gentle skin and kind eyes, your expectations are not going to be fulfilled. What we get is a crazy prophet who lives like a hermit and wears wild clothes and eats insects and condemns his followers. It struck me last night that John the Baptist is a lot like Harry Potter's friend Mad-Eye Moody. Just like Mad-Eye Moody, John the Baptist is extreme and unattractive and terrifying, even while he's also a champion for the triumph of

goodness over evil. Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near! Turn around, change your mind, change your attitude and your expectations; prepare the way for the One who is to come. The Kingdom of heaven is near, and the world is not even close to being ready!

So far, none of this bodes well for us. We have a mad-eyed, moody prophet who preaches fire and brimstone, a fourth-century martyr who's burned and blinded and beheaded, a Messiah who both baptizes and punishes by fire: none of these images brings much hope into our world. And we need hope in this world, where fiery airplanes bring down skyscrapers, and firebombs destroy crowd after crowd in the countries where we wage war, and gunfire kills random people on the streets of our own neighborhoods. Unquenchable fire.

A clever exegete who seeks hope in today's gospel might point out that fire can be purifying as well as destructive, it can set the stage for new growth in a prairie or forest, it can provide light and warmth in the dark of night, it can create beauty in the studio of an artist. But we have to be honest and admit that there's nothing redemptive about the kind of fire that burned Saint Lucy, or the fire that humans use to destroy one another today. And there's nothing safe or healing or purifying about the kind of fire that John the Baptist wishes upon unrepentant sinners.

So what do we do? Do we try to figure out how to bear enough good fruit that God won't cut us down and throw us into the fire? Do we read John the Baptist's words as if they were only directed at the Pharisees and Saducees, thanking God that we're the kind of trees that bear good fruit? Do we pray that God considers us wheat and not chaff—or, if we're a mixture of both, do we work hard to ensure that the wheat in us

outweighs the chaff? Do we adjust our Advent expectations and wait for a divine baptism of fire and the Spirit (whatever that means)? Do we thank our lucky stars that John the Baptist wasn't the Messiah? Do we hope that his vision of the Lord was wrong, that the One who is to come will be gentle and forgiving and embracing of everyone?

All of these answers are too easy. We've just started the year of Matthew, and there's nothing easy about Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. He holds children in his lap and claims he's come to bring the sword and divides families and heals a little girl and says "do not worry about anything" and condemns people to the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth and calms the storm and feeds the five thousand and pronounces woe upon sinners and teaches forgiveness and overturns the tables in a fit of anger and heals the blind man and curses the fig tree. Jesus is not easy, and John the Baptist is not easy, and the Christian life is not easy, and Advent is not easy, and winter is not easy, and being in relationship is not easy, and living out our vocation is not easy, and reading the Bible is not easy.

And in the midst of it *all*, we are still called to repent and to believe that the Kingdom of heaven is already near! To be able to bear John the Baptist's message, we must believe that in our repentance there is gospel as well as law. Martin Luther said that the whole life of a believer should be a life of repentance. It means being sorry for your sins and changing your way of life. But more importantly, repent means turn around, and look toward Christ—just as John the Baptist, even in the midst of all his judgmental finger-wagging, also always pointed toward Christ.

We're called to turn around—to reverse our expectations—to reframe the questions and stop asking what *we* should do, and recognize that it is only because of the

nearness of the Kingdom that we even have the ability to repent, and it is because of our rootedness in God that we can bear any good fruit at all. And we're called to believe that just as spring will follow winter, life can spring forth from death. And we're called to believe that a God who has the power to make children out of stones can also quench the fires of judgment: with a Word, and with water and bread and wine. We're called into relationship with a God who is not easy and who does not come as we expect. And yet we're called to trust that grace and peace are for us, despite our worst selves.

We're called to live as if the Kingdom of God were already here, despite all evidence to the contrary. Our friend Joe Sittler once wrote: "The Kingdom of God is not a plan, or a program, or a concept, or an idea. It is a force within whose grip every [person] is caught; a grip never loosened . . ." [*The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) pp. 56-57]. The Kingdom of heaven is the image of God engraved upon our lives, upon our interactions with one another, upon our world. And we're called to act as if the Kingdom of God just might exist on this earth, and to live so that the hungry are fed and nation no longer rises up against nation, so that the lion and the lamb lie down together in peace. And we're called to seek forgiveness, because no matter what we do it is not enough. We're called to proclaim peace in a time of war. And we're called, like Sankta Lucia, to feed the hungry.

And we're called to believe that a little child shall lead them. And we're called to hope that on the Day of the Lord, God's mercy will wrap itself around God's wrath, and that if there is a fire it will not burn us, and that there will be redemption for all who have suffered and forgiveness for all who have sinned. We're called to repent and pray—and

to rejoice, because the waters of baptism are even stronger than that unquenchable fire.

Amen.

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