

Advent's Fiery Preacher

**St. Mark Lutheran
Advent-two services**

**Pastor Ken Welsh
Wednesday, Dec. 7**

Preparation: Read Matthew 3:1-12

The sixth of December may not hold much significance for you. You may not consider it a part of our Advent and Christmas celebrations. Yet, on this day of the year, we remember a man who greatly influenced the way Christmas is celebrated.

Dec. 6 is the date set aside in the Church Year to remember Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. But one of the best stories of his life took place long before he became an Episcopal priest. It is reported that Nicholas was orphaned, left without a mother and father, as a small child.

But that unfortunate event had a silver lining: he was left as an heir to a fortune. While he was still a young man, he found out that a certain family in his village was so poor that the father of the house was considering selling his own daughters into a despicable form of slavery.

One dark night, he crept up to the house, and he dropped three bags of gold through the window. It was discovered by the fortunate family in the morning. And so began the Christmas tale of a midnight bringer of gifts, laden down with heavy sacks, but motivated by a heart filled with compassion and generosity. The story, of course, has given birth to many other Christmas stories, including one of a man richly clad in fine clothes who delivers gifts to all children based on whether they are classified as "naughty or nice".

But the original Nicholas went on the streets of night on errands of charity, turned his parish hall into a clinic during the plague, refused to eat during a famine until all had food, and was thrown into jail protesting the injustices suffered by his people. He would probably be scandalized to see how people dress him up and talk about him today.

Now it might take a little work to fit the man of the day for Dec. 6th into our Advent, but it takes a lot of work to fit into Advent our man of the day in our text, John the Baptist. It would take a lot of cleaning up and dressing to fit this man into our Christmas dinner parties and holiday gatherings. Everything about him—from his camel fur and leather clothing to his diet of bugs and honey, from his lack of political correctness and offensive preaching, would probably make him a questionable guest at our nice Christmas Open House. He would probably barge in and throw both the hosts and guests into dismay!

But our text tells us God found a good place for him. Matthew 3 states, "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is he who was spoken of by the

prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." "'(verses 1-3)

"You brood of vipers!" he cried out to the most highly recognized respected religious people of his day. Do you realize what he was really saying? He not only called them vipers, he saying their mother was a snake! He is telling them to stop calling Abraham their Father. They are not children of Abraham but offspring of that old serpent named Satan! There was no soft sentimentality here. John the Baptist had a serious statement to make, and he wanted their attention.

Martin Luther summed up John's message in the Smalcald Articles as he called John the fiery angel of the Apocalypse, the messenger who announced the time for the fulfillment of the mystery of God. So is John the fiery preacher we are talking about in our title? Despite all his bold claims and stinging criticisms, he is not the fiery preacher of today's text. In fact, John warns us against thinking that about him. John says, "I come with water only and a message to repent, but he comes with the Spirit and with fire!"

Nicholas the bishop, Isaiah the prophet, John the Baptist-they are just little lights. Their work was to point to Jesus who is "the light of the world". That's what Jesus said-"I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12)

And it is not a sweet little baby that John is talking about in Matthew 3:12. That we remember Jesus coming as promised into the world as a baby is appropriate, but what we need to really focus on at the same time is Jesus-is-coming-again. John says of his Second Coming, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquestionable fire."

If you have never harvested barley or wheat, you might not understand what a winnowing fork is. Farmers cut the stalks of grain and had them delivered to the threshing floor. There one of several methods were used to pound or loosen the grain from the straw. When that was done, one could take a winnowing fork and throw it up in the air so the wind could blow the chaff and straw away and the grain would fall at the winnower's feet and could easily be collected. If it didn't blow far away, the straw and chaff could be burned.

That illustration is symbolic of that great day of the Lord when Jesus will separate the righteous from those that are not saved. The Lord is coming again, but not as a baby. We are little lights also, meant to point to Jesus as the "light of the world" , to share with people that we are all sinners and there is a need to repent of our sins, to trust in Jesus, and to be baptized into his death and resurrection. That's why Pastor Mark and I have been putting emphasis on the

theme of "Find One More". Christmas is a good time to do that

Those who believe in the Lord can be assured that we who have been baptized and believe have already been judged, we have been purified, we have been made clean and new. When Jesus says to is, "My child, your sins have been forgiven," his words are final.

Advent should not be a season of artificial cheer and baseless hope, but of genuine joy. It's Jesus who gives our lives purpose and meaning. Let us do our part to prepare others for the coming of the King of Kings. Amen.