

THE BLIND SHALL SEE!

The Third Sunday of Advent (December 12, 2010)

Isaiah 35:1–10 & Matthew 11:2–15

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and Our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The words of our Lord cause us to consider what it means to be great. What is greatness? Is it fame and fortune, is it power and influence? John had none of these things going for him. He never published a book, never appeared on TV, he didn't make it to the cover of People Magazine. He was never Time's Man of the Year; he never won a Nobel Prize, organized a charity, or ran for political office. He didn't wear expensive clothes or live in a mansion or drive a fancy car or hang out with celebrities. The religious leaders thought he was crazy or demon-possessed. He accumulated a following for a while, but then they went off to follow his cousin, Jesus.

He was on the verge of starting a movement inside the church; some people even thought he might be the Messiah. But then he criticized the bad morals of Herod who was messing around with his estranged sister-in-law and got himself thrown in prison. Eventually he would die in that prison, his head served up on a silver platter as a reward for a step-daughter's seductive belly dancing.

Would you call that great? The world didn't nor will it! It will laugh in the face of anyone that calls John great. Now, Herod he was great. In fact Herod's father was Herod the Great. People feared him. He had whole towns wiped out. Caesar was great. But John, this wild man of the wilderness eating locust and digging honey out of rotten trees? Great? Get real, insane, maybe - novel, perhaps. He is interesting, a religious freak show of a sort, a distraction from daily ho-hum, but not great. What did he accomplish? Where is his legacy? What did he have to show for his efforts? He didn't even land in prison for the cause. He confronted Herod about his morals, his private life. Everyone knows that private life doesn't matter in public office? Separation of church and state and all that stuff!

Can you imagine some street preacher today, one wearing say, a horse hair suit and a leather belt on a corner shouting "Repent" and carrying a cardboard sign reading "Be baptized"? Are you going to call that person great?

Jesus did call someone great just like that. He says that there was not a greater man born of woman.

John had sent his disciples to see Jesus. He gave them a question. Are you the one? Are you the one we've been waiting for? Or should we keep on looking? Over the past 40 years, I have heard many ministers preach on how John while in prison, wobbled just a bit as he contemplated his own future in Herod's dungeon. But the early church fathers and Martin Luther didn't see John as wavering or doubting. Rather they saw John doing what John always did - pointing the way to Jesus. "Behold, the Lamb of God."

John was giving his disciples a little assignment, sending them out on a field trip. He was in prison. There was nothing much for him to do there and no reason for his disciples to hang around. And so he sends his disciples to Jesus with a question, so that they might hear the answer for themselves, in their own ears. He sends them to Jesus. He's not content with their loyalty; he doesn't want them hanging around keeping him company. He wants them to be with their Lord.

That's part of John's greatness - the greatness of his service to Christ. John knew who he was; he knew his place in relation to Jesus. He was not the Christ; he was a voice preparing the way for the Lord. **"He must increase, and I must decrease,"** John said when his disciples flocked to Jesus. "Good! Let them all go to Jesus. That's where they belong." So bearing John's question on their lips, a question designed for them to connect with the Old Testament prophesy of Isaiah with Jesus he sends them to their Lord. It's time for their eyes to be opened.

"Are you the coming one," they ask Jesus. Are you the one John spoke about, the one with the winnowing fork in hand, the one who was going to lay the axe to the root of the fruitless tree, the one bringing a baptism for fire and the Spirit? Jesus points out the signs - the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the poor hear the good news. These are the messianic signs right off the pages of the prophet Isaiah. This is the primary purpose of Jesus' miracles - to show that the age of Messiah has come with the coming of Jesus. They point to Jesus as the promised "coming one."

The greatness of John was his message, the Word he preached. Prepare the way of the Lord. John preached without regard for what people thought of him or how high up in the polls he was. John was not some sort of politician controlled by public opinion. John had in mind only one thing - repentance - and he pursued it to the end, calling even Herod to repentance. John was the opposite of the weedy soil in Jesus' parable, where the good seed gets choked out by the weeds, the "cares and concerns of this life." John didn't care what he wore - camel's hair and a leather belt were adequate for him. He didn't live in some pricey neighborhood; the wilderness was his home. He didn't care what was on his table or in his wine cellar - locusts and wild honey were sufficient for John's "daily bread."

That's the core of John's greatness - an unwavering reliance on the Word of God. That's what makes John great, greater than anyone born of woman. He was totally captive to the Word of God that he preached. John wasn't worried about "being relevant, or the life application" as so many preachers are today. He didn't care if his message was "practical" or "meaningful." The Word creates its own relevance. Repentance is highly relevant in view of the alternative of hell.

John was a prophet, he proclaimed the Word. He was more than a prophet, he was himself a prophetic sign in the wilderness. He was an Elijah, whom the prophet Malachi said would come before the Lord's coming. John was the end of the Old Testament, pointing the way to the new. If you believe that Jesus is the coming Messiah, then you would have to believe that John was Elijah. Both demand faith - **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."**

John was great, no question about it. Jesus said so. But Jesus also said that the least in the kingdom of God, even the littlest baptized baby, is greater than John. GREATER? That's almost as crazy as calling John "great," But it is so. To be great in the kingdom of the crucified king is to be least and lowly and dead to this world. This kind of greatness is nothing that the world desires, much less seek after. In fact, it's a threatening kind of greatness. It challenges the world and our own sinful nature. It's a continual reminder that we live daily by the Word - the Word that created us, the Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us, the Word that redeemed us on the cross, and the Word that daily sanctifies us.

You too are great in that greatness that was John's. Oh, you may not feel great as you are tending to your family or doing the various mundane, mind-numbing tasks of your vocation. You may not feel great when your life seems to be going nowhere and you see no apparent return on your investment. Greatness in the kingdom sometimes is just trudging through this earthly plane. But great you are. Not in yourselves. In yourselves you are sinners, children of Adam, fallen and despicable

people, which means anything but great. But baptized into Jesus' death and life, joined to Him through faith, having His body and blood in your body, breathing His Spirit, you are great in Jesus, riding in the wake of the victory of His death and resurrection.

You may not win a Nobel Prize, (but then do you really want one?) or appear on TV or write a best-selling novel. Open your eyes and see you are great in the only greatness that matters on the Last Day - the greatness of Christ Crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. You are great in the Lord Jesus and only in Him (†) do you have eternal life, For Jesus sake and in Jesus Name, Amen and Amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN!