

Ordination of Jordan McKinley
St. Paul Lutheran Church, Stanwood, Iowa

Nativity of John the Baptist
24 June 2012

Your Office is to Comfort
Isaiah 40:1-8

It is a happy coincidence that this service of ordination falls on the day when the church commemorates the birth of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is something of a template or proto-type, if you will, for the preaching office into which Jordan McKinley is placed this afternoon.

John is that voice crying in the wilderness. If not in the Judean wilderness, then the wilderness of Iowa is where the voice of John the Baptist will be heard in the mouth of the man you will know from this day forward as *Pastor* Jordan McKinley.

Good preacher that he is, John does not speak of himself but of Christ, the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. He wore the vestments of Elijah's office-not a dainty surplice of lace from the Almy catalog-but a cassock of camel hair and for a cincture, a leather belt. Vestments cover the man so that we pay attention not to the person but to the words he is given to speak. So John preaches the Messiah who is coming.

To be sure, John proclaims the law. He gives voice to the words of God that condemn the sin and kill the sinner. He speaks of unquenchable fire and unerring judgment. His words cut to the root of the unbelief that parades itself as piety and will not let the God of Israel be the Lord that He is. He will not flinch as he exposes the liberal Pharisee and the conservative Sadducee as snakes fleeing from the fire of divine wrath. He names Herod's sin as adultery when the king takes another man's wife. John is no reed-like preacher shaken by the wind of public opinion. He is no slick prince of the pulpit laboring under the illusion that he must make the Word of the Lord relevant to his generation. He is no hand-wringing preacher, whimpering and whining about his evident lack of sanctification and moral progress in the lives of his audience as though a good dose of the law could put some teeth in the Gospel. John wields the axe of the law and he proclaims its lethal message without compromise; he speaks a word that condemns and executes the unrighteous. Yet all of this, is as theologians are wont to say, John's alien work. It is a work that John does in service of a greater work. It is a word that John speaks so that you might hear another word, a word not of condemnation but of consolation. It is the work of John the Baptist, like it is of all Christian preachers-as it will be for the man you will now know as Pastor McKinley to "afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted" as the saying goes. To those who have made an easy truce with their sin and live as though God's will does not matter, the words of the preacher come as attack and they deliver affliction. But to those who broken by their sin who have no peace and security, the preacher makes his advent to speak words that absolve, words that set free, words that comfort.

Comfort- that is what the pastor is put here to do. God wants the afflicted to know that the warfare is over. Reconciliation is achieved. Peace with God is established in the blood of the cross. This is the message which God commissions His servants, His ambassadors to announce and herald to all who have ears to hear wherever they are in this world. This is a word of healing

for those lacerated souls with broken hearts to use language of the old Bavarian pastor Hermann Bezzel.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, and that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” John is born to prepare the way for the Lamb of God whose death would atone for the world’s sin. John’s existence is consumed by the message he proclaims for he is that voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the glory of the Lord’s presence for all flesh to see, calling Israel to repentance and faith in Jesus. John is the great preacher of consolation not in spite of his deadly preaching of the law but because his proclamation of God’s wrath crushes and makes futile every attempt you would make to have God on your own terms. With the law, John bull-dozes every rough trail that you would blaze as a highway to heaven so that your trust and confidence might be in Christ who alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

God prepared John even from his mother’s womb for the office of being a voice crying in the wilderness. No doubt in home and temple, John studied Torah, learned his catechism, and prayed the psalms. The same God who knit John together inside Elizabeth’s body formed John to be a preacher, putting words into his ears and through his ears into his heart so that when John opened his mouth, it would be the voice of the Lord that spoke. That is the way of preaching. “For what we proclaim” says the Apostle Paul “is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

Just so, Brother Jordan, the Lord has prepared you for this day. Through the vocation of faithful Christian parents you were nurtured in the knowledge of the Lord from your baptism. You were taught the Holy Scriptures and the Catechism. In one way or another, the Lord planted in your heart the aspiration to prepare for the Ministry and so you were led to the seminary. You have studied the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, the doctrine and history of the church, you have demonstrated your aptitude to teach. You have been instructed, examined, and declared fit and ready to take up this noble task. All this has been given you not as an entitlement or as way of elevating your status, but in the way of a gift to be spent for the well-being of those you are called to serve, those for whom Christ Jesus purchased with His own blood. John would say that he was decrease so that Christ might increase. So it is with you, Jordan. Your ordination is really about you demise, your decrease so that Christ may increase; so that He may be everything!

The life of John the Baptist was expended in his preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He was used up by the message that he was sent to proclaim so that the Lamb of God might be lifted up as the only Savior. The Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunwald pictures John the Baptist standing there beside the cross with an open Bible in one hand and with the other hand pointing a larger than life finger toward the crucified Christ. John is that finger that points to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John does his work by calling us to repent of our sins and calling us to faith in Jesus Christ who answered for our sin by His atoning death at Calvary. So Luther says “Let us look to the mouth and finger of John with which he bears witness and points so that we do not close our eyes and lose our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; for to the present day John still very diligently, faithfully, and richly points and directs us here, in order that we might be saved” (Klug I:91).

The work of the pastor is that of John the Baptist; he is the finger that points not to himself but to Christ crucified and he is the mouth that speaks not of himself but of Jesus. God grant to you, dear brother, the grace and courage to be a John the Baptist – a voice crying in the wilderness so that the people committed to your care are comforted with the forgiveness of sins purchased by Jesus blood. You are put in the office of the holy ministry today for just that purpose. It is the one constant and consistent theme of all you say and do whether in the pulpit, at the altar as you give out the body and blood of the Lamb of God, in the classroom, at the bedside, in the homes of these congregations, or in front of an open grave. Comfort, comfort these people with the word of the Lord that stands forever, the promise of God's faithfulness in Christ Jesus!

God grant to you, dear St. Paul congregations in Stanwood and Bennett, the grace to hear in the voice of your pastor the words of Jesus that believing in Him you might have eternal life. Amen.

-Prof. John T. Pless