Today we take one more look at John, the Baptizer, for the fourth time in seven weeks. He is a mysterious religious figure; an important player in the Gospel story, whose ministry is highly influential in the early church. John makes a powerful impact on the people who come out into the wilderness to spend time with him. He preaches; he baptizes; he draws quite a crowd. Lives are changed. New beginnings in faithfulness happen. Word quickly spreads about him. Soon enough a great crowd gathers around him.

It is enough of a crowd that the religious officials in Jerusalem become nervous. They send interrogators, who find John and question him: “Who are you, and what are you doing out here in the wilderness? Why are all these people with you? Are you trying to start an uprising?” John’s answer is simple: “I am not Messiah. I am here to point him out to you.”
Which is exactly what happens in today’s Gospel lesson. It is the day after he is questioned by these religious authorities. He looks off in the distance, and sees Jesus coming his way. So he declares: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

John may have been one of the most popular religious leaders of the time, but he knows he has a higher call. His duty is not to develop a following for himself. [Are there religious leaders in our day who would do well to realize this?] No, John’s call is to make sure his listeners and followers know that someone greater than he is in their midst, and point them in that direction.

The next day the same thing happens, and we see that John is beginning to have some success. When he points out Jesus, the two disciples who were with him actually leave John, and begin following Jesus.
We don’t know how much time passes between verses 37 and 38. It may have been a matter of seconds. It may have been a matter of miles. But eventually Jesus turns, sees them, and has what seems like a strange conversation with them.

Jesus: “What are you looking for?”
Disciples: “Teacher, where are you staying?”
Jesus: “Come and see.”

It is an odd exchange — one we might not have anticipated. But look at where it ends up: Jesus invites them to come and see, and they do.

What happens next is beautiful.

Andrew is one of the two disciples of John. The combination of John’s directing, and Jesus’ inviting, and what the disciples see when they are in the presence of Jesus, convinces him that Jesus is the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. And what’s more, he takes up the mantle of his previous teacher, John. He too begins to point to Jesus. He immediately finds his brother, Simon, and brings him to Jesus. Because of Andrew’s witness, Simon becomes Peter, and eventually one of the boldest and most important leaders in the early church.
“Come and see.” The first public invitation to experience the Messiah’s presence.

This will become the public witness of the early church. “Come and see.” They invite others to experience what they have come to know in Jesus. And what do people see?

1. They see a community of faith, deeply committed to following their Lord, and unafraid to share the good news even as opposition arises in the world.
2. They see brothers and sisters who are committed to one another’s wellbeing — even selling their possessions, whenever one of them came into particular need.
3. They see a band of believers who are organizing their community around forgiveness, mercy and new life.

Come and see is the invitation. And what is seen? The real

This is the ministry that Jesus calls us to continue today — here at Saint Peter, and throughout the Christian Church. We too are called to invite others to “come and see.” Which is challenge enough in itself.

But here is something even harder: we are called to make sure that if they come and see, what they see is Jesus. Jesus who is present in our midst, and empowering our faithfulness. Jesus, who gives us a new vision for what it means to be children of God. Jesus, who proclaims to the world, through the people and ministry of Saint Peter Lutheran Church, that love and grace can transform lives, and make a difference in this world. As was the case in the early church, the fabric of our community will be our witness to the world.
We are starting to talk about ministry in this way in our leadership circles. In fact, one goal we have for the coming year is to let this way of thinking shape the way we carry out our mission in the world.

We are developing what is commonly called a “Narrative Budget.” A narrative budget is a vehicle to describe how we use the money that is donated to our organization. But it is broader than that. It refers to how we make use of our building, and how we direct the work of our staff. It is a way of looking at our priorities as a congregation — what it is that we seek to accomplish, as we put to work the resources that are at our disposal.

Ultimately, this is not about us. It is about God. It is about God’s call to us. It is about God’s hopes for us. It is about how God is seeking to move through us, to touch the world, and (as St. John models so powerfully) point others to Christ.

Here is the key question: “What story is God seeking to tell the world through the way we at Saint Peter use our money, our facilities and the efforts of our staff?

We think there are actually five distinct stories God is telling through Saint Peter these days.
The first of these stories has to do with worship and devotion — specifically, the story of how God is forgiving us, renewing us, calling us and granting us new life.

As this chart shows, we put the greatest portion of our resources to work in this area — which is typical for a Lutheran Church. We believe what we do when we are together in worship is very important. We try to do it as best we can. And we trust that when others join us on a Sunday morning, or for a special service, or for a time of devotions in our home, that they too will be touched by God’s presence and power.

The second of these stories has to do with faith formation — specifically the story of how God is expanding our knowledge, deepening our trust, and strengthening our resolve.

This has to do with learning more about God, faith and ourselves. It also has to do with how we deepen our trust in God’s promises, how we commit ourselves to God’s purposes, how we live together with grace and forgiveness at the center.
The third of these stories has to do with serving our neighbor — specifically the story of how God is making a difference in the world through our love and compassion.

I am convinced this is an area where God wants us to grow. We currently invest a little less than 20% of our resources in ministries that touch people beyond these walls. That’s a great start, and I’d love to see us move that towards 50%. Wouldn’t it be a powerful story to tell, if we were committed to give away half of what we took in?

The fourth of these stories has to do with sharing our faith — specifically the story of how God is drawing others into an experience of grace through the witness of our lives.

Whether it has to do with friends and neighbors who have never known Christ before, or who are returning to a life of faith after a time away, we are excited to welcome new people into our church and into our faith. Talk about following in the footsteps of John, the Baptizer!
The fifth of these stories has to do with being a caring community — specifically the story of how God’s presence becomes real through the love and care we share with each other.

This community is one of deep love and compassion, and I see indications of that every week. We want to affirm this strength, and continue to build on it, so that whenever one of us is in a challenging time, Saint Peter is there — surrounding them with the support and encouragement they need.

These are the five stories we believe God is trying to tell to the world through Saint Peter today. And this graphic is a way to illustrate how we have put our resources to work, in an effort to be faithful to what we believe God is up to.

You’ll be hearing a lot about this at our Annual Congregational Meeting (on February 12), and I hope you’ll be hearing a lot about this through the coming years. As John did his best to follow God’s call — God’s call to announce the arrival of Jesus in this world; we want to do our best to follow God’s call — God’s call to share the good news of the Gospel with the world that surrounds us.
This is, in some ways, a monumental task. And we'll need a lot of help. Each of you has certain gifts and abilities; certain passions and interests. God wants to use these assets to tell the story of faith through our life together. I'm looking forward to exploring this with you in 2017, and I hope you're looking forward to discovering how you might become an important part of who we are as a people of God.

So let's keep talking about this. As usual, our hosts have a devotional tool that they will share with you as you leave this morning. Sometime today, won't you talk with one another about how God is calling you to point others to Christ? It is the heart of the ministry God entrusted to St. John the Baptist. It is the heart of the ministry God has entrusted to us. May we be found to be faithful!
This week, let’s give the last word to Miroslav Volf.

For Christian faith not to be idle in the world, the work of doctors and garbage collectors, business executives and artists, stay-at-home moms or dads and scientists needs to be inserted into God’s story with the world. That story needs to provide the most basic rules by which the game in all these spheres is played.

Whether we are doctors, garbage collectors or stay-at-home parents, God is seeking to tell a story to the world through us. May it be the old, familiar story of Jesus and his love.

Please stand with us as we sing today’s Hymn of the Day.
1:29 The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw