

HE MUST INCREASE, BUT I MUST DECREASE.

The Baptism of Our Lord – 1st Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Jan. 7, 2018



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Lessons

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

St. Mark 1:4-11

Prayer of the Day

Holy God, creator of light and giver of goodness,
your voice moves over the waters. Immerse us in your grace,
and transform us by your Spirit,
that we may follow after your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

*the witness of John
a humble, faithful model
Christ is the main thing*

Sermon

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Amen.

How many of you have made New Year's Resolutions this year? Is anybody willing to share what you've resolved?

Take a few minutes for responses.

When someone offers a response, ask how many others have those same plans for the new year.

Now you are on the hook: we know what your resolutions are! Maybe we should all check in half-way through the year and see how we're doing with our resolutions. A little accountability just might get us all a bit closer to what we're hoping to accomplish.

**The Beginning
of a New Year**

¹ Romans 1:7, 1st Corinthians 1:3, 2nd Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2nd Thessalonians 1:2, Philemon 3; New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

That's the question, isn't it: What will it be for you this new year? What will you fix in your life? What will you accomplish in 2018 that you didn't get around to in 2017? What goals have you set for yourself, or your family, or your business?

The new year, in our culture, seems "all about me" — what's in it for me? What could make life better for me, or for those who are closest to me? And on one level, this is fine: life is a gift from God, right? Why not make the best of it?

But our faith doesn't allow us to have only this in mind. Pastor Rick Warren began his phenomenally popular book, Purpose Driven Life, by stating: "It's not about you. Looking within yourself for answers doesn't work. If it did, we'd know it by now. As with any complex invention, to figure out your purpose, you need to talk to the inventor and read the owner's manual — in this case, God and the Bible."

It's Not About you.

And he is right, of course. The life of faith is not all about you. Just about everybody who has taken our scriptures seriously, and who has taken the history of our movement seriously, has concluded that a self-absorbed experience of Christianity is not an experience of Christianity. It's not about you.

Today's Gospel lesson moves us in a similar direction. We find ourselves, again, with St John, the Baptizer. It is the 3rd time in 5 weeks that he has been featured in our Gospel lesson. If we think back on what we've heard from John, we will remember that he is a prophet; a spiritual guide; and among the first of those to identify Jesus — he was an evangelist. John is, arguably, one of the most influential men in the New Testament. Jesus himself says in Matthew 11, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist..."²

John: It's Not About Him.

But even given all of that, listen to how John refers to himself: "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of [Jesus'] sandals." John understands, despite all the adulation he receives, that it is not all about him. It is all about Jesus. And the measure of John's faithfulness will hinge upon whether or not he lives into this understanding. This may well be the most important aspect of John's ministry. It is what allows his ministry, both then and now, to let the main thing be the main thing, helping people to experience and be blessed by Christ.

And John seems to get it. In the fourth Gospel, when his disciples complain to him that Jesus is stealing his thunder, by also baptizing people and drawing a crowd of followers, John is reported to have said, "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him...' For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."³

The more people who met Jesus and began to follow him, the more faithful John was to his own call. He knew it wasn't about himself — it was about Jesus. And would go on to make sure that as many people as possible would understand this.

I wonder, sometimes, if this is true of Jesus, himself. We are pleased to call ourselves Christians, and so grateful for what Christ has done for us. If it wasn't for his death and resurrection, we would have no hope to be right with God. But so many times, like St. John, Jesus' focus is not on himself. It is on helping his listeners reconnect to God in meaningful ways. And he does so by serving

Did Jesus want a Christian Church?

² St. Mark 11:11, New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.

³ St. John 3:28, 29b-30, New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.

them: healing them, raising them, teaching them, forgiving them. These were powerful actions — many of them. And the crowd responded in expected ways. But was Jesus actually trying to create a new religious tradition in his own name? Or was he just trying to help his followers come to know God's love and grace?

We know this is true about Martin Luther. We've been celebrating our heritage as Lutherans this past year. One of Martin Luther's strong commitments was to adjust or eliminate anything that got in the way of someone coming to know the grace of God in Christ. That's why it is called The Reformation. We believe that if anything about our tradition doesn't work (in other words, if it prevents someone from growing in God), our responsibility is to reform it; to fix it! Luther didn't want his name, or his personality, to get in the way of someone drawing near to God. He certainly never wanted a church named after him. He would probably be horrified to see how the Lutheran movement developed after his death. If there had to be a new church, Luther said, it should be called the "Evangelical German Church;" in other words: "the Church in Germany with good news.

Luther Didn't Want a Lutheran Church.

That is our passion here at Saint Peter. We talk about how important it is to be welcoming. We have committed ourselves to helping all people know they are welcomed into the love of God, just as they are. And we will be wrestling, this year, with how we might do a better job of this. We hope to:

Why Do We Welcome People at Saint Peter?

1. Advertise in more effective ways — discovering how to keep this congregation from being one of the best kept secrets in the south metro area.
2. Learn, together, how to do better at offering personal invitations to those who don't have a church, welcoming them to join us for a Sunday.
3. And doing an even better job of helping people realize how welcome they are once they get here.

Why would we do this? Not just so we might grow in numbers (although that would be nice...). Not to impress our neighbors (although it wouldn't hurt for them to know we are thriving here). Not even because this church needs to keep growing to survive. (Of course amidst all the change in the world we'd like to survive, but the truth is: if our ministry is significant and meaningful, we will be just fine.)

No: there is only one reason we are intent on welcoming people to StPLC. We believe their time with us will help them in their desire to know God better. If we can stay focused on this, then will have a ministry that is significant and meaningful. One that will thrive. And even one that will honor the model St. John provides in this morning's Gospel lesson. John understood it wasn't about him. So did Martin Luther. So does Saint Peter.

And, hopefully, so do you and I. This morning, as we remember St. John the Baptizer, who once said, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."⁴ As we remember him, we commit ourselves to following in his footsteps, and carrying on the ministry he began. Not presuming to think of ourselves as more than we should — recalling Pastor Warren's reminder that the Gospel is not about us — but instead serving Christ by serving others, and giving of ourselves so that they might come to discover the love and grace of

Our Witness to the World

⁴ St. Mark 1:7-8, New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.

God. This is the essence of John's ministry. This is the essence of the Christian faith. And my prayer is that this might be the essence of our congregational life, and the witness you and I share with the world around us, helping them to see how meaningful our faith is in our lives.

"He must increase, but I must decrease." The rallying cry of St. John the Baptizer. May it be our rallying cry as well — in fact: the rallying cry of the whole Christian Church on earth. That would be a fitting way to honor what St. John has to teach us today.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Gospel Lesson; English Text ⁵

^{1.4} John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." ⁶

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{1.4} ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. ⁵ καὶ ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ἑξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν. ⁶ καὶ ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφύα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐσθίων ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. ⁷ Καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερος μου ὀπίσω μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἰκανὸς κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμᾶντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ. ⁸ ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς ὕδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. ⁹ Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου. ¹⁰ καὶ εὐθύς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὡς περιστερὰν καταβαίνον εἰς αὐτὸν ¹¹ καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα. ⁷

First Lesson; English Text:

^{1.1} In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. ⁸

⁵ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/Lectionary.

⁶ St. Mark 1:4-11, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

⁷ St. Mark 1:4-11, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

⁸ Genesis 1:1-5, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

Second Lesson; English Text:

^{19.1} While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied — ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them. ⁹

Second Lesson; Greek Text:

^{19:1} Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ τὸν Ἀπολλῶ εἶναι ἐν Κορίνθῳ Παῦλον διελθόντα τὰ ἀνωτερικὰ μέρη κατελθεῖν εἰς Ἔφεσον καὶ εὑρεῖν τινὰς μαθητὰς ²εἶπεν τε πρὸς αὐτοὺς· εἰ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐλάβετε πιστεύσαντες; οἱ δὲ πρὸς αὐτόν· ἀλλ' οὐδ' εἰ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἔστιν ἠκούσαμεν. ³εἶπεν τε· εἰς τί οὖν ἐβαπτίσθητε; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· εἰς τὸ Ἰωάννου βάπτισμα. ⁴εἶπεν δὲ Παῦλος· Ἰωάννης ἐβάπτισεν βάπτισμα μετανοίας τῷ λαῷ λέγων εἰς τὸν ἐρχόμενον μετ' αὐτόν ἵνα πιστεύσωσιν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν εἰς τὸν Ἰησοῦν. ⁵ἀκούσαντες δὲ ἐβαπτίσθησαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, ⁶καὶ ἐπιθέντος αὐτοῖς τοῦ Παύλου [τὰς] χεῖρας ἦλθε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐπ' αὐτούς, ἐλάλουν τε γλώσσαις καὶ ἐπροφήτευον. ⁷ἦσαν δὲ οἱ πάντες ἄνδρες ὡσεὶ δώδεκα. ¹⁰

⁹ Acts 19:1-7, New Revised Standard Version Bible, *opp. cit.*

¹⁰ Acts 19:1-7, The Greek New Testament, *opp. cit.*