

Behold the Lamb of God! Luke 3:1-18

A sermon for the second Sunday of Advent

Every year the second and third Sundays of Advent are about John the Baptist. This grows to be a problem for the preacher. One of the things that happens is the preacher dresses up in a burlap sack, carries a plate with grasshoppers and honey on it, and walks up and down the aisle with a staff, crying: "Prepare the way!"

That's not entirely incorrect because that's the way the text reads. John the Baptist was the new Elijah, the greatest of the prophets (Matt 11:14). In the book named Malachi, ("Malachi" is the Hebrew word for messenger.) it says that there will be a messenger who will come and proclaim the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment (Malachi 3:1, 4:5).

According to Matthew's Gospel (11:11-14), John the Baptist was the greatest of the prophets. Yet John the Baptist himself says: "I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandal of the one whom I am pointing to" (Luke 3:16).

Behind these texts is hidden the whole problem of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. When you go to Jewish thinkers and Jewish literature, you find that there are fifty volumes of the Talmud, written after the time of Christ, as well as other Rabbinic literature. Nowhere in the Jewish literature describing the First Century and the time of Christ is there any mention of John the Baptist. He is simply not mentioned.

There is one reference to John the Baptist in the first century, Jewish historian, Josephus. He mentions that John the Baptist existed, although that may be a forgery. What does that tell us about this text? Luke makes it very clear that at a certain time under certain rulers the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah (the "Word of God" coming to John the Baptist indicates he is a prophet), citing Isaiah 40:3-5: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord . . . the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.'"

In the Lutheran-Jewish dialogue we Lutherans found that the Jewish people have 39 books in Hebrew, called the Jewish Bible, and we also have 39 books in what we all the Old Testament. Together we have a commitment to the same 39 books written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Therefore the scholars on this dialogue concluded that they should be able to study them together and even use them for worship together.

So they tried. They tried to do a Bible study led by a scholar from each side. But it didn't work. It was a disaster. Why? It wasn't because these scholars didn't know Hebrew. Of course they did. We had professors who knew Hebrew. It wasn't that they weren't intelligent and well-trained. The best trained clergy in Christendom have traditionally been the Lutherans. But the best trained clergy in all religions are the Rabbis. And they would say to the Lutherans as the Lutheran and Jewish scholars looked at a passage together:

How do you get that? It's not there. Don't you know your Hebrew? Don't you understand the text?

Then the dialogue team tried to worship together with the Psalms. After all, the psalms are songs and couldn't we use them together, not just for study, but for praise? But it didn't work. Both teams ended up reporting to their respective bodies: We have not had a Lutheran-Jewish dialogue; we have had a Lutheran-Jewish conversation.

What does that say about John the Baptist? Here is John the Baptist, as it is recounted in Luke 3, who comes and says these three verses from Isaiah 40 are pointing to Jesus Christ. We say about the text: "There it is; it's clear. It is self-evident that they point to Jesus." And the Jewish scholars would say: "No, it doesn't. You don't know what you're talking about."

That brings up the whole question of the New Testament use of the Old Testament. It's a whole field of study. Scholars spend their whole lives on it. And that leads to some unusual conclusions. When the New Testament uses the Old Testament, it uses it in all kinds of ways. Different Greek (the Septuagint) and Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, and different ways and different usages and meanings. And we say it must be right because it's in the New Testament. Those who are experts in the Old Testament say that's not accurate.

We have the idea that the Bible is one seamless cloak of sixty-six blocks of material, and these Jewish scholars look at it and say: You Christians, you have misread the texts. Many of the Jewish scholars are proficient in New Testament Greek, and they bring out these difficulties.

What do we do about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments? Some say, and this is from the first five or six centuries after Christ: The Old Testament is the Shadow and the New Testament is the Reality. Or the Old Testament is Promise and the New Testament is Fulfillment. Or the Old Testament is the seed that is planted and then the plant grows into its fulness in the New Testament. All you have to do is take the Old Testament and add a little something.

What can we use to sort that out? The most evident and direct point to make is that there is no cross in the Old Testament. There is a book titled, *The Cross and the Old Testament*, by H. Wheeler Robinson, a well-known Old Testament scholar. The argument in that book is that you have Job and he suffered, and you have the suffering servant of Isaiah, the sufferings described in the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Therefore where you have suffering, that's the same thing as suffering in the New Testament.

But Robinson's thesis failed because he reduced the cross to an idea. The cross is not an idea. The cross is the key to history and changed both time and eternity. Obviously there is suffering but suffering does not sum up the cross.

Another way is to go to the Trinity. There is no Trinity in the Old Testament. There have been those who have said there are hints of it in the Old Testament. Some find in Genesis 18 that the three angelic visitors who come to see Abraham are a foreshadowing of the Trinity. Notice the idea of shadow and reality. Others say that in the Old Testament there is God the Father, and then in the New there is God the Son and the Holy Spirit. They then conclude that that Jewish people have 1/3, and the Jewish people will just shudder at the idea and turn away, saying: What in the world!

When we say God the Father, we mean God the Father of Jesus Christ who is present with us in the Holy Spirit, and that there is only one God. And the Jews respond: No, that is idolatry! Although the metaphor of God as "Father" is found in the Old Testament in a few places, Jews do not use that term or any other imagery in order to avoid idolatry. They simply say "the name": He is the One who is, who acts (Ex 3:14). That is what Yahweh means. There is no Trinity.

What's at stake in all of this can be seen in two Greek words for "newness." Both words we translate "new," but in the Greek these words mean something very different from each other. The one word "new" means "it comes again," "renew." We have words like neophyte, neologism, things that become new again. Every spring life becomes new again. In the Hebrew way of thinking what was there at the beginning in Adam and Eve in Eden will come back, meaning repeated again at the end.

But the New Testament has a second word for "newness," and that second word is very different. That second word signals "a break." It means the right time, the fulfilled time, the opportune time. God is doing something radically new. And that is what he did. God himself came in Jesus Christ and died on the cross. Something that is simply unthinkable, in fact, idolatry, as far as Old Testament and Jewish thinking are concerned.

There are two consequences from this that are really important for us. The first one is: How do we think of this religion called Judaism?

Paul takes up this problem in Romans 9-11, and it is a real struggle because he was a Jew. On the one hand, he writes in Rom 9:4-5 that the [Old Testament] covenants belong to the Jews. And in Rom 11:29 he states: "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable."

At the same time he writes in Rom 11:32: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all."

Finally Paul sums it up in Rom 11:33-36:

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

'For who has known the mind of the
Lord,

or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?
For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever.
Amen."

The second consequence which comes from that second Greek word for "newness" is the task of being a messenger like John the Baptist.

About twenty miles south of Strasbourg, France, there is a town called Colmar. There in the art museum is a painting by a famous Reformation artist named Matthias Grünewald. Christ hangs from the cross and to Christ's left is John the Baptist forever pointing to Jesus Christ on the cross. That painting is based on another verse in the New Testament, John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That's what John the Baptist does eternally, and that is also the task of all of our lives. Everyone who is in Jesus Christ has the task of pointing forever to Jesus Christ. We are messengers, all through our lives, pointing to him and saying: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Amen