

## THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Matthew 11:2-10

*Follow the finger.*

There's been vigorous debate among the young ones. The lines have been drawn. There's no fence to straddle. I am sad to say that there's even been name-calling and mudslinging. The point of contention? Is there a Santa Claus? And I have the answer. Yes, most certainly. His name is St. Nicholas of Myra. The bad news is that he's not quite the man everyone imagines him to be.

Perhaps the most famous story told of St. Nicholas involves three sisters whose father squandered the family fortune. At that time, when a girl wanted to marry, her family was expected to provide a dowry, a gift to help the new family get started and provide support for the wife should her husband die. Girls without a dowry were destined to marry classic losers or enter slavery or prostitution to pay the bills.

St. Nicholas heard what had happened. He wrapped coins in stockings and discretely tossed them through the window as they slept. Hence, Christmas stockings. Nicholas wanted the gift to remain anonymous. Hence, gifts in the name of another. Nicholas' Dutch name was *Sinterklaas*. Here it became Santa Claus. On a side note, Luther made the Christ-child, or *Christkindl*, the gift-bearer. *Christkindl* became Kris Kringle here, which, ironically, became another name for St. Nicholas.

But there's more to Nicholas than meets the eye. While you may tell the kids they'll get no presents if they hit, *Sinterklaas* knew how to lay the smack down. A fourth-century bishop, he attended the Council of Nicea to deal with the teaching of Arius, who denied that Jesus was truly God. Nicholas debated Arius and, frustrated at Arius' blasphemy, slapped him. Say what you may, Santa wasn't going to let anyone forget who Jesus was and what He did. St. Nick didn't distract attention from the Christ-child. He pointed all to Him as God made man for us and for our salvation. Nicholas and John the Baptist would have gotten along just fine.

Now, I don't mean to brag, but you should be proud I'm your pastor. I showered this morning. I shaved and pulled the bugs out of my hair. My breath doesn't stink of grasshopper-honey. I'm wearing an alb, not unwashed camel's hair. I haven't called any of you a brood of vipers, although you in the back should be careful (☺). I'm a real "pulpit prince" compared with this prison preacher, but soap and a hairbrush never saved anyone, and bad breath and grubby garments never damned anyone. The preacher's only as good as his message.

St. John the Baptist had hit a rough patch of sorts as or late when we find him in this portion of Scripture today. He'd been arrested for preaching against King Herod's scandalous marriage to the wife of his brother Philip, who was her uncle, and the king's other sorted and sundry deeds. His disciples were concerned about him. Even worse, however, there was a new prophet taking his place, seemingly using John's misfortune for His own fortune. They had already complained to John even before he was imprisoned, "*Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.*"

John rebuked them: "*I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He must increase, but I must decrease.*" It didn't do much good, though. They continued to bicker with Christ and His disciples, even siding with the Pharisees in a debate.

John had heard enough. Such are the trials of pastoral ministry. Had they slept through his sermons? Did they zone out in class? Had they committed the Catechism only to short-term

memory? Did they miss the big crucifix in His prison cell? For Pete's sake! They saw him baptize Jesus, as the Spirit descended as a dove, and the Father spoke. They saw him point to Jesus and say, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" They heard him confess he was unworthy to untie the straps of Jesus' sandals. It didn't take a rocket scientist. Put two and two together. But, if they wouldn't follow his finger, perhaps the Lamb of God to whom he pointed could knock some sense into them. Off to Jesus they go. That must have been a nice option. I've sent a few members to Jesus, but I had to do the funeral first.

"*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" Imagine asking the wafer and wine this question as you meet Jesus in the Sacrament. No, you're called, not to open your mouth to question Jesus there, but simply to receive Him, to listen and digest. But Jesus is a patient man. I guess that's par for the course for saving sinners.

Before I broke my foot, when I was still lighting fools up with the rock on the basketball court, I'd always gloat, "In your eye," when I drained one. All right, the only part of that that's true is that I broke my foot, but I am making a point. Sometimes the basketball player shows his talent, not by the trash he talks, but by the plays he makes.

St. Luke writes of this incident, "*In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight.*" "In your eye," in other words. What John had stuffed in their ears, Jesus now set before their eyes. Isaiah's words from our first lesson were fulfilled. Don't you just love it when God's plan comes together?

When I was in Seminary, I had to study homiletics, a fancy word for "teaching you how to speak in public without wetting yourself or passing out." One of the things we'd critique was hand gestures. Man, those other guys had a lot to learn. But John knew the power of a hand gesture. He took his finger and pointed his hearer's right to Christ. Herod might have cut off his head, but that finger still speaks. "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" That is John's testimony, and may it never perish!

There's no waffling like a bruised reed with John, no surveys to ask what the congregation wanted to hear. **He stabbed them with their sins and then pointed.** "*Behold, the Lamb of God.*" He was no dandy in designer duds with his ear to the ground for fleeting fads with which he might scratch the fickle ears of the masses. He was retro, pointing out in person as the greatest of the prophets Him whom the prophets prophesied by faith and not by sight. The others heralded a future advent; John ran alongside the King's chariot, trumpet in hand. Yet He was also least in the kingdom of God, saved only by grace like the rest of this heap of sinners.

Let Christ now become greater and we lesser as well, as Faith submits our reason to His Word, our selfish desires to His selfless love, and our sinful, rebellious flesh to His righteous, unquestioning obedience. And, should we lose our heads to gain a crown, may our fingers never be silenced.

St. Nick and St. John the Baptist are real people. But neither of them cares a lick whether or not you believe in them; they'd be second-rate pastors if they did. Rather, they'd have you believe on Christ. **So follow their fingers.** If you don't, you might just get a slap in the face. Jesus doesn't point John's disciples to His miracles today. He points them to Scripture by His miracles. May we find Him in the same as His Word comes to life in His person! [Pointing to the altar] "*Behold, the Lamb of God.*" Come, Lord Jesus, come! Amen.