

Sermon on John 1, 29-34, 07.01.2007

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming towards 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.'

Dear Congregation,

There is always something new about stories we have heard for many times. If you are going to church on a regular basis you will hear at least two or three times a year about John the Baptist. I have preached countless times about him and still found something new, which I would like to share with you this morning.

This little passage from the Gospel of John, which, by the way, was not written by John the Baptist, tells in a few sentences the fulfilment of John's task, to prepare the way for the Messiah, who is, no doubt, Jesus Christ.

Like the story goes, John sees Jesus coming and he declares about him, that he is the Lamb of God, the one, will baptise with the Holy Spirit and who is the Son of God.

This sounds familiar to us; we have heard this many times already and may not see the extraordinary in his comments. But let us take a step back for a moment and let us realise that John's life is based on a promise of which's fulfilment he had to wait quite some time.

Remember, the Gospel of Matthew tells us about the family relation between Mary and Elisabeth, John's mother, who bears a son although she is old already. Mary becomes pregnant some month after her. John is born and a few months later Jesus sees the light of the world when he was born in the stable in Bethlehem. The promise is upon John's life from the first moment on, that he will be the one who accordingly to the Prophet Isaiah will prepare the way of the Lord in the desert and announce the coming of the Messiah. But for thirty years this promise did not materialise. John went to the desert, started the life of a hermit and developed a theology and style of preaching which was unheard of in Israel.

He was willing to accept many challenges and deprivation. If you ever look for a new career opportunity, do not become a preacher in the desert, unless you love a diet of locusts and honey and like to dress like a homeless.

What really struck me, when I thought about him was simply that his life as a faithful person goes in two stages: Anticipation and fulfilment connected and followed by faith.

He is waiting. And he is able to so not only because he has received the promise of God, but because he is expecting something from God, which will change his life, the life of his people and the course of history.

Anticipation – that is not just waiting, but living in the eagerness that any minute the proclamation of old might come to pass.

Psychologist John Trent tells of one of the greatest disappointments of his life. John's father abandoned the family when John was just a baby, so his mother raised John and his brother by herself.

One day, in his junior year of high school, his dad called. Both John and his brother played high school football, and their dad had seen their names in the local paper. He wanted to meet the boys after the game that week.

John says that he barely slept the night before the game. All his life he had dreamed of meeting his father. He didn't know how to feel now that the dream was actually going to come true.

The next evening, the Trent boys played as hard as they could, hoping that their dad would be proud of them. After the game, they waited in the stands with their mother. They searched the faces of every man who passed by. But as the last fan left the stadium, they realized sadly that their father wasn't there. He hadn't shown up. They had waited with so much hope in their hearts, and their father had broken a promise and not even shown up to meet them. (1)

The people of Israel were awaiting a Messiah. They had been waiting for hundreds of years. When John the Baptist began his preaching and teaching ministry, the people's response was so electric that they started asking if John might himself be the coming Messiah. John's answer was significant: "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." He was referring, of course, to Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah the whole world awaited.

Christ represents the fulfillment of God's promise. John Trent and his brother waited to meet their dad who failed to show up. That would never happen to God's people, because God is a promise keeper.

Remember that God is a promise keeper. Evil will be defeated, and good will reign triumphant. Christ represents the fulfillment of God's promise.

After all this waiting, after all the looking forward to this precise moment, John experiences the fulfillment of the promise God gave to his parents and to him. The time of anticipation was over when Jesus showed up, and the time of fulfillment began.

However, there is another thing we need to understand. God doesn't always work in the ways we expect. John's time of waiting ended, but soon after also his life came to an end because of the cruelty of King Herod. Herod could not stand John, not only because he showed his admiration for Jesus who was considered a rebel, but also because John was not compromising to anyone and interfered in the King's personal affairs when he criticized the marriage of Herod. That costs him his head, which was offered to Herod's daughter as a birthday present.

If you were to give the people of Israel a quiz concerning how they expected the Messiah to come, it is doubtful that any of them would have quoted Isaiah's wonderful prophecy: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6) They expected many things, but one thing they did not expect was a baby born in a stable. What a humble beginning for the king of kings. No wonder it was difficult for many people to accept his divinity. But, if you study history, you'll discover that most people only see God's work in hindsight.

In fact, so often in history the very best people in society find themselves on the other side, opposing God. That was the problem with the Pharisees. They were the best people of their time, but the best people are sometimes on the wrong side. It's only later that we see God's hand at work.

The author Mark Bryan tells a story from his own experience. Bryan grew up in poverty in a small town in West Virginia. When he left home, he vowed that he would become successful. But the first few years on his own were difficult. One year, Bryan went home for Christmas. He bought a fancy cashmere coat at a thrift store and rented a luxury car. He was determined to play the "big shot" for his family. But Bryan soon discovered that his family wasn't interested in his fancy clothes or his shiny car. They were just happy to see him.

God doesn't always come in the way we might expect God to, but the coming of Christ always represents an opportunity for a new beginning. John the Baptist came preaching judgement. That was the message he knew best. Christ came, bringing grace and hope. John's preaching was based on the law, and by those standards everyone was a failure. Christ's teachings were based on God's love and on love's standards, teaching that we are all accepted by God. The coming of the Christ child marked a new beginning for humankind. That is why we call the book that describes this new approach to life the New Testament. It was a new beginning for people, and it is a new beginning for each person who opens his heart for Christ.

The glue of all the experience in John's life was his faith. This helped him not just to persevere, but also to accept all the changes the coming of Christ for him personally and for the way God was preached about as the one who is called a father and forgives his children all the insufficiencies and inadequacies.

In a cathedral in Copenhagen, Denmark there is a magnificent statue of Jesus by the noted sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. When Thorvaldsen first completed the sculpture he gazed upon the finished product with great satisfaction. It was a sculpture of Christ with face looking upward and arms extended upward. It was a statue of a majestic, conquering Christ. Later that night, however, after the sculptor had left his fine new work in clay to dry and harden something unexpected occurred. Sea mist seeped into the studio in the night. The clay did not harden as quickly as anticipated. The upraised arms and head of the sculpture began to drop. The majestic Christ with arms lifted up and head thrown back was transformed into a Christ with head bent forward and arms stretched downward as if in a pose of gentle invitation. At first Thorvaldsen was bitterly disappointed. As he studied the transformed sculpture, however, he came to see a dimension of Christ that had not been real to him before. It was the Christ who is a gently, merciful Saviour. Thorvaldsen inscribed on the base of the completed statue, "Come unto me," and that picture of the Lamb of God in his mercy has inspired many people.

Anticipation and fulfilment – bound together by faith which is unwavering. Can John become an inspiration for us? Could he be someone we emulate as individuals and as a congregation?

Remember the football game of the Trent boys? They gave their best although the father was not present. Our father is present, but I assume that we are very often not playing our best game, that we do not even try. Faith makes helps us to seek for perfection even if the conditions are not perfect.

If we do not anticipate that God is fulfilling his promises for us, we will live a life in vain. If we do not think that God is keeping his promises, we will never come close to the experience of this fulfilment. If we wait for God to show up in our lives, he will come. Maybe unexpected, maybe not the way we thought he might come, maybe at his time, maybe after a long period of waiting, maybe in the desert of our life, maybe at the Jordan, calm and peaceful.

The important thing is that our faith makes us using our time effectively while we are waiting for him to arrive, preparing for him to come any minute, expecting that this experience will change our lives forever and knowing that this will be for our best. Amen.

And the Peace of God which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.