ORDINATION OF BRIAN THORSON                    26 JUNE 2005  
Zion and Trinity Lutheran Churches                           Lewisville, MN


+Jesu Juva+

HOLY MINISTRY IN THE WAY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
Saint John 1:19-29; 3:30

In the Church Calendar, this past Friday was day commemorating the birth of John the Baptist, yesterday was the 475th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, and today the church our Lord Jesus Christ receives the gift of another pastor, a man who like John the Baptist will preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins and a man like those sturdy confessors at Augsburg will confess Christ Jesus as the Lord who justifies the ungodly. At Augsburg it was confessed that “instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments” (AC V:1, Kolb/Wengert, 40) so that we might obtain saving faith and “no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called” (AC XIV, Kolb/Wengert, 47). Today, a man who has been instructed, examined, and called is ordained, put in the office that the Lord Jesus established for the preaching of His Gospel.

Members of Zion and Trinity congregations, you might well ask the question that was put to John the Baptist of your pastor-elect, “Who are you?” Notice how John responds to this question. He does not answer by listing his credentials as one who had retreated into the wilderness to prepare for this day. He makes no reference to his priestly pedigree as the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, born under such unusual circumstances as the “miracle baby” of their declining years. John does not even mention that he is a blood relative of Jesus. When asked the question, “Who are you?” He answers by telling his inquirers who he is not: “I am not the Christ.” Are you Elijah, then? “No” John answered “I am not.” Are you the Prophet promised by Moses? “No “replied the Baptist. John will claim nothing for himself. Finally his identity is not important. It is all about Jesus.

John was sent to bear witness to the light. He was not the light. In fact the mid-summer brilliance of John the Baptist is completely eclipsed and over-shadowed by the everlasting radiance of the Sun of Righteousness to whom he points. John is the Forerunner, the messenger who goes before the king to announce His advent and prepare for Him a straight path in the wilderness. However he is no more than a servant, unworthy even to attend to the sandals of Messiah. John is Elijah, says Jesus, for those who have ears to hear. A prophet, Elijah, witness, forerunner- yes all these titles apply to John. But nothing describes John better than the word from Isaiah, the voice.

John is that voice crying in the wilderness. Good preacher that he is, John does not speak of himself but of Christ, the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. He wore the vestments of Elijah’s office—not a linen surplice from the church supply store—but a cassock of camel hair and for a cincture, a leather belt. Vestments cover the
man so that we pay attention not to the person but to the words he is given to speak. So John preaches the Messiah who is coming.

To be sure, John proclaims the law. He gives voice to the words of God that condemn the sin and kill the sinner. He speaks of unquenchable fire and unerring judgment. His words cut to the root of the unbelief that parades itself as piety and will not let the God of Israel be the Lord that He is. He will not flinch as he exposes the liberal Pharisee and the conservative Sadducee as snakes fleeing from the fire of divine wrath. He names Herod’s sin as adultery when the king takes another man’s wife. John is no reed-like preacher shaken by the wind of public opinion. He is no slick prince of the pulpit laboring under the illusion that he must make the Word of the Lord relevant to his generation. He is no hand-wringing preacher, whimpering and whining about the evident lack of sanctification and moral progress in the lives of his audience as though a good dose of the law could put some teeth in the Gospel. John wields the axe of the law and he proclaims its lethal message without compromise; he speaks a word that condemns and executes the unrighteous. Yet all of this, is as theologians are wont to say, John’s alien work. It is a work that John does in service of a greater work. It is a word that John speaks so that you might hear another word, a word not of condemnation but of consolation.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, and that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” John is born to prepare the way for the Lamb of God whose death would atone for the world’s sin. John’s existence is consumed by the message he proclaims for he is that voice crying in the wilderness, announcing the glory of the Lord’s presence for all flesh to see, calling Israel to repentance and faith in Jesus. John is the great preacher of consolation not in spite of his deadly preaching of the law but because his proclamation of God’s wrath crushes and makes futile every attempt you would make to have God on your own terms. With the law, John bull-dozes every rough trail that you would blaze as a highway to heaven so that your trust and confidence might be in Christ who alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

God prepared John even from his mother’s womb for the office of being a voice crying in the wilderness. No doubt in home and temple, John studied Torah, learned his catechism, and prayed the psalms. The same God who knit John together inside Elizabeth’s body formed John to be a preacher, putting words into his ears and through his ears into his heart so that when John opened his mouth, it would be the voice of the Lord that spoke. That is the way of preaching. “For what we proclaim” says the Apostle Paul “is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

The Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunwald pictures John the Baptist standing there beside the cross with an open Bible in one hand and with the other hand pointing a larger than life finger toward the crucified Christ. John is that finger that points to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John does his work by calling us to repent of our sin and calling us to faith in Jesus Christ who answered for our sin by His atoning death at Calvary. So Luther says “Let us look to the mouth and finger of John with which he bears witness and points so that we do not close our eyes and lose our Lord and
Savior, Jesus Christ; for to the present day John still very diligently, faithfully, and richly points and directs us here, in order that we might be saved” (Klug I:91).

Even as the Lord God sent John the Baptist to prepare His way before Him, so God continues to send pastors to His church today to do the same work, preaching repentance and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. And with John, the motto of every faithful pastor is “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Brother Brian, your life to this point has been one of increase. The words that Luke used to describe the boy Jesus apply to you: “you have increased in wisdom and in stature” (Luke 2:52). You increased in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ as your parents taught you the Scriptures in fulfillment of the vow that they made when you were baptized. Pastors and teachers at St. James Lutheran Church and School in Howard Lake nurtured you in Christ’s Word. God was at work in that same Word shaping your life and implanting in you the hunger to know more of His truth in your student days at University Lutheran Chapel. Your study was intensified at the seminary as you mastered Hebrew and Greek and were firmly grounded in the craftsmanship that is expected of those who rightly handle the Word of Truth. A year of vicarage at St. Paul Lutheran Church and Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Red Bluff and Corning, California further served to increase your competency in the ministerial skills required for pastoral work. You have been examined and declare fit and ready for the pastoral office.

All that you have learned, we pray, will continue to increase. But in a very real way, this day of your ordination is not about your increase, but your decrease. In Baptism, the Triune God made you His own; He claimed you in body and soul as His precious possession, marked with His Son’s cross and sealed with His Holy Spirit. Now as you are ordained, you are reminded and it is made evident that you do not belong to yourself but Christ. You are His servant, entrusted with the Office of the Holy Ministry so that the Lord’s sheep might hear His voice. In that sense, like John the Baptist, you must now decrease so that Christ may increase. Your voice becomes His Voice as you speak the words that He gives you to utter from Holy Scripture. Your hands are the instruments that He now will use to baptize and to bless, to distribute His holy body and blood even as you always point to Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You will decrease in your own opinions as every thought is taken captive to Christ so that those who hear you do in fact, hear Him.

The life of John the Baptist was expended in his preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He was used up by the message that he was sent to proclaim so that the Lamb of God might be lifted up as the only Savior. So we circle back to the question posed earlier in this sermon, the question raised of John the Baptist and of Brian Thorson, “Who are you?” John’s answer fits: “I am not the Christ.” The man ordained this afternoon is not the Christ. Like John the Baptist he is a sinner who lives by the repentance and forgiveness of sins that he preaches. He is not the Christ, but he is Christ’s servant put here to proclaim the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God grant to you, dear brother, the grace and courage to be a John the Baptist— a voice crying in the wilderness so that the people committed to your care are comforted with the forgiveness of sins purchased by Jesus blood. God grant to you, dear Christians
of Zion and Trinity congregations, the grace to hear in the voice of your pastor the words of Jesus that believing in Him you might have eternal life. Amen.

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VI. 24.2005