We stand on a threshold today. The man who has been your vicar this past year will now become one of your pastors. Vicar Berger becomes Pastor Berger. Zechariah also stood on a threshold; it was the point of closure of the Old Testament and the dawning of the day of the New Testament. It was not an easy transition for Zechariah. It had been a long and silent Advent Season for Zechariah. For nine mute months he waited for fulfillment of word of the Lord spoken to him by the angel Gabriel. Just as God had kept His promises to Abraham and Sarah, so he demonstrated his faithfulness to the old priest and his wife in bringing forth a son from Elizabeth’s barren womb. Even at John’s birth, Zechariah must keep his joy to himself for his mouth is still closed and his tongue restrained. Then on the eighth day, circumcision day, God open Zechariah’s lips and his mouth breaks forth with that hymn of praise, that pure preaching of the Gospel as he proclaims the gracious work of the God who has come to His people.

It is as though the whole of the Old Testament, pent up within Zechariah’s heart in nine months of silent waiting, now comes to expression in the words of his song. For nine months, his lips were sealed. He could not chant the psalms or pray the prayers. Those sweet words of the Torah could not roll off his tongue. Now the Spirit breaks the silence and Zechariah is no longer quiet. He blesses the God of Israel as his hymn rehearses the holy story of the Lord visiting and redeeming His people from bondage in Egypt. He sings of David and the strong horn of salvation that God has raised up in his house. He chants of holy prophets who have been since the world began. He proclaims the oath that God swore to father Abraham, that holy covenant God will never forget.

Zechariah’s song does not end in the Old Testament. He sings of his son, that little boy with the bloody mark of the covenant freshly cut in his flesh, that we will come to know as John the Baptist. The *Benedictus*, Zechariah’s hymn begins in the Old Testament but it ends in the New Testament. Just as John the Baptist stands with one foot in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament, so Zechariah’s *Benedictus* is the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. That is the way of Advent.

The foremost preacher of Advent is Zechariah’s late-born son, John the Baptist. We do well to hear him for he is as Luther says “an image, and a type, and also a pioneer, the first of all preachers of the Gospel” because points to Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is a prophet and yet more than a prophet. He is the voice of prophecy brought to a single point of light that is focused on Christ alone. John did what all preachers are called to do. He prepared the way of the Lord. He announced His coming. In the words of the Gospel according to John, he bore “witness of the Light, that
all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.”

John’s whole life would be spent in the ministry of Christ. Of Him, John would say “He must increase and I must decrease.” So it was that as the brightness of Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, dawned on this sin-darkened world, John faded into the shadows. That was just fine by John. He had no need to call attention to himself, to gain any kind of personal prestige or prominence. He was willing to be spent and consumed for the sake of making Christ known. His career ended in jail. He never wrote a Gospel. He wasn’t an apostle. He didn’t live to be an eyewitness of the Resurrection-Herod would see to that.

He was content to play the part that was given him- a prophet like Elijah who would go before the Lord to prepare His way. Zechariah’s sings of what his son is given to do. His words now apply to you, dear brother for like John the Baptist, God is giving you to His church as a preacher of Advent. You are called to prepare the Lord’s way in the wilderness of this dying world, calling people to repentance and Baptism, giving people the knowledge of forgiveness of their sins by proclaiming the tender mercies of God in Christ crucified. You are called to bring the light of Christ to those whose lives are overshadowed by death and guide their feet in the way of that peace which the world cannot give.

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 studies Torah, learned his catechism, and prayed the psalms. So you, Web, have been prepared. In His providence, the Lord has directed your steps to this day. You left a previous career to journey to Fort Wayne where you learned Greek, studied the Scriptures and the Confessions. You increased in knowledge of the history of the church and you mastered the skills required 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. 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 sins 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).

The work of the pastor is that of John the Baptist; he is the finger that points not to himself but to Christ crucified and he is the mouth that speaks not of himself but of Jesus. 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 Shepherd of the Hills congregation, the grace to hear in the voice of your pastor the words of Jesus that believing in Him you might have eternal life. Amen.

Prof. John T. Pless