

Homily: From Bishop Jason Zinko, Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

Over the past months, I've noticed something. Like you, I've noticed a significant number of negative things about the pandemic. Things like job loss, stress, death and grief, and social isolation. These are real issues and I think that they will affect us and our communities for a long time.

But there are also positives. People have been more generous.

The pace of life has slowed down for many people – meaning more time with immediate family. Workplaces have needed to be more flexible and realistic about what people can accomplish.

Many of us have been more willing to support local economies.

There have also been some real positives specifically about church involvement. I know that your church councils may disagree, but this time away from our same old patterns is helping to us to see a broader vision of how the church can be the church today.

In many instances, online worship attendance across our churches has remained consistent or gone up from traditional in-person Sunday gatherings. But probably the most exciting thing is seeing an increase in how people are engaging in the work of the church and looking for opportunities to be fed and to grow in faith.

I've had conversations with pastors telling me that people who have not consistently connected to the worship life of the congregation are now regulars online, especially with devotional times and learning about spiritual practices. It seems that many people are beginning to look beyond what has been a focal point for us for many years – Sunday morning worship – and instead are digging into the meaning behind it all.

I'm actually very excited about what this all means for the church, and I can't wait to see more clearly how God is working in our lives during this time.

The reason I bring up this observation is because I think that it ties directly to our reading today. I've heard, and read (and let's be honest, I've preached) a lot of sermons this time of year that talk about John the Baptizer. In all of them, there is some mention of John being a bit weird. Most have mentioned something about his role as a prophet, or at least fulfilling the role of herald laid out in the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Some have delved into the question about why Jesus needed to come to be baptized in the first place.

Instead of talking about any of that, I want to get right to what it means – why this story matters for us as followers of Christ. And it is not to learn about John the Baptizer.

This story – the whole reason for this day in the Christian calendar – is to focus on baptism. Not only Jesus' baptism, but ours. Since we are tied to Christ in and through baptism, we can't really separate this story from how we are part of it in our own baptism. And I don't mean the just the actual rite of baptism in church. I'm talking about why we baptize and what it means for us. I'm talking about who we *become* in baptism.

Fundamental to our understanding of baptism is that it is all about identity. It's about belonging to the family of God. We hear the voice from heaven talking to Jesus, saying, "**You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.**" Jesus, in his baptism, is told that he lives in the loving embrace of God. In our own baptisms, we are also told that we live in that same gift of grace. We are also the ones who are called children of God. Celebrating how God spoke to Jesus in his baptism reminds us of how God spoke to us in our baptism.

And that is significant. In our world today, there are fewer and fewer places where we can feel as though we really, truly belong anymore. Hardly anybody works for the same company for their entire career. Hardly anyone lives in the same house for their entire adult lives. Fewer people are members of organizations or groups for more than a few years before moving onto another community. Family members move to other cities or towns, and

some families just disintegrate altogether. Most of the last year affected how we engage with friends and family. For those of us who are used to travelling and meeting people face to face, we know that even the best technology is a poor substitute and has left us feeling disconnected.

Whatever circumstance we are in, changes in culture and social interaction means that we don't feel like things shape us in the same way. Because of that, it's harder to figure out who we are. But in baptism, we know exactly who we are. We know exactly who we belong to. We know that through an act involving some water and a few words, we have been brought into God's inheritance and into the community of believers that we call the church. We are given an identity that shines through everything that we say and do.

That identity and that grace also means that God looks past our sins and our shortcomings, and still gives us forgiveness and grace. And that means that each day we are freed again to live our lives knowing that we are perfect and loved by God our creator.

This is all purely a gift from God.

Now what we do with this, and how we live this out are also important. This is something that it would be worthwhile looking at John the Baptizer as an example.

John understood that living out the identity that God gave us in baptism asks something of us. God doesn't claim us and name us so that we can just sit around like a lump watching the world go by without taking part in God's work. Baptism is actually the beginning in helping to bring about God's kingdom in our world today.

Baptism is the start of us preparing the way of the Lord. And the way of the Lord is a way of justice. It's a way of equity and forgiveness. It's a way of sacrifice and self-giving – of caring for others and community above ourselves or our individual comfort. The way of the Lord means turning to face God again so we can see how to be a part of God's intention for all of creation.

John gave a few pretty clear examples from his day. He told tax collectors not to cheat the system. He told soldiers not to extort and threaten. He told the comfortable to share with those who needed comfort. He told people not to assume that they were following God just because of the family or country they were born into or the place they went to worship.

I wonder what some examples would be for us today. What would it look like for us to listen again to God and live in a way that brings God's hope for creation into reality here and now?

I'm certain that you or your congregation are already doing some of that work. You may be collecting and distributing food to those

who don't have enough. You may be advocating and fundraising for those in distant places who have been displaced or live through war. You may be helping an elderly neighbour with their grocery shopping so that they don't need to risk their health. Or you may send social media posts or call members from your congregation just to check in. As congregations and as individuals, I hope that we do prepare the way of the Lord regularly.

But preparation isn't just a one-time event; it's a way of life. As followers of Jesus and as baptized Christians, that way of life is a result of the grace God gives us first. It's something we do daily in response to God's gifts. We can't just sit through church as though attendance is all that God wants from us – as though just getting to the building or connecting online is the goal. God wants us to engage deeply with the people and the world through our faith.

So that will mean inviting people who are alone into our communities as a way of bringing hope into someone's life. It will mean letting our faith inform the way we do business and how we treat colleagues and competition. It will mean respecting the people that our friends don't think deserve it. It will mean practicing generosity out of the abundance that God has already given us. It will also mean regularly taking time to practice and

grow in faith so that we are able to hear God's voice more clearly each day.

That's what Jesus did after his baptism. It was immediately after this scene that Jesus went out into the world bringing: good news, healing, forgiveness, compassion, and justice. It was after this that Jesus ate with people and taught people, stood up for people and walked with them. It was after this that Jesus regularly made time for prayer.

I hope that we will be able to see and follow that example as best as we are able. I hope that God will give us the faith to see and hear what Jesus tells us. And I hope that, more than anything, God gives us the strength to follow Jesus' lead in preparing the way of Lord right where we are. That is who we are. It is who God made us to be. And it is how we can help God to bring forgiveness, justice, and peace to the world.