

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:  
YOUR SPIRITUAL PHYSICIAN  
TEXT: Luke 3:1-20; Malachi 3:1-7b;  
and Philippians 1:2-11**

Some years ago I began experiencing some tingling sensations in my arms and hands. My first course of action was to consult my chiropractor who ordered x-rays. When he put the x-ray films up on his viewer, he said, "Oh my! Just as I suspected. Will you look at that!" I looked and said, "Looks like a spine. So what?" I think I'm supposed to have one of those. That's good to know that nobody can accuse Pastor Wright of not having a backbone! "Well, that is good news but look here," he said, (and he pointed to a place on the x-ray with the tip of his pen). Again, I asked what exactly as I supposed to be looking at? And there... Invisible to my untrained eye, but immediately obvious to him, were three bulging cervical discs.

Today, Dr. John the Baptist exposes some maladies which may be less than obvious to our untrained eyes—the perilous reality of sin. Like a patient oblivious to issues hidden in an x-ray, we often fail to recognize the severity of our spiritual maladies. We're pretty good at seeing the sin in others... but not so good in seeing the sin in ourselves. What's more we see others who seem to prosper despite their sinful behavior, tempting us to downplay the consequences of our own sin.... But let's not be deceived. Sin, in all its forms, has the power to destroy.

Even the youngest among us learn the art of deception. They quickly realize that lying can shield them from the consequences of their actions. As we witness the prevalence of sin in the world, we can become numb to its destructive nature. We no longer see the damage sin inflicts on our souls and our relationships with God and others.

Dr. John the Baptist is here to reveal the hidden depths of our spiritual condition. Like a skilled physician, he illuminates the silent killer lurking within our souls. In this imperfect world, we may be tempted to believe that sin is a minor transgression. We witness the success of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous, and we may even begin to question the justice of God. But let's not be deceived. The day of judgment is coming, and what are you going to do when you face a perfect God? When **every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire?** In that moment, we'll understand the true nature of sin and the severity of its consequences and it will be too late.

God sent Dr. John to warn us of the dire consequences of sin. I believe that it was in last Sunday's Collect of the Day, in which we prayed: **"Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance."**

We pray that God would stir up our hearts—to recognize our sinful nature, to see it not as a minor flaw, or a temporary disease, but as a deadly disease—a ticking time bomb, that if left untreated, can lead to eternal damnation.

John reminds us that just as a farmer separates the wheat from the chaff, God will separate the righteous from the wicked. Those who refuse to repent will be cast into the eternal fire. In fact, John says that the Lord's **winnowing fork is** (already) **in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat** (the righteous) **into his barn** (heaven), **but the chaff** (the impenitent) **he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

So while we may not like going to the doctor and hearing there's something wrong with us, we need the doctor. It is good for us.

When sinners came to Dr. John at the Jordan River, they received a sobering diagnosis: the terminal illness of sin. But there was hope! He offered a cure: **repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins**. Crowds flocked to him, seeking this life-saving treatment. You, too, have received this same cure, not from John, but from **the One greater than he, the one coming after him—the one mightier than he**—the great physician **who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire** forgiving your sins and empowering you to live a holy life.

Fallen human nature often inclines us towards complacency. Once we've recovered from an illness, we may be tempted to return to the behaviors that contributed to our condition. A wise physician will caution against that, urging us to adopt healthier habits. By ignoring their advice, we can wind up back in the same terrifying mess. We ignore their advice to our own peril.

Dr. John had a clear message for those who came to him with the question: **What then shall we do?** "Stop doing what you've been doing!" He urged the people to share their blessings with those in need, to abandon their selfish attitudes, and to practice love and compassion. To the tax collectors, he said, **"Stop overcharging people. Your greed is a dangerous sin."** And to the soldiers, he warned, **"Stop abusing your power. Your self-centeredness is a threat to your soul."** These harmful behaviors, he explained, would lead them back to spiritual sickness and danger.

Imagine stepping into Dr. John's office today. What diagnosis would he give you? What sinful habits might he identify? Perhaps it's a lack of love, a greedy heart, or a selfish spirit. Always putting yourself first, that it's all about you? Maybe you struggle with resentment, bitterness, anger, or revenge. Or perhaps your focus is misplaced, seeking joy in material possessions or worldly pleasures rather than in God.

Whatever your particular struggles might be, Dr. John would most likely offer the same prescription: repentance and faith. He would urge you to turn away from your sinful ways and trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ.

We gather here today NOT because we're spiritually healthy, but because we're in need of healing. We need the healing medicine of God's Word and Sacraments. We long for our **crooked paths to be straightened**, our **valleys** of despair **to be filled** with hope, and our **mountains** of sin **to be leveled**. We pray that Jesus, our Great Physician, will **smooth out the rough** and rebellious **places** in our hearts.

May His forgiveness and Spirit overcome the *"threatening perils of our sins, and may we be saved by His mighty deliverance."* As the prophet Malachi reminds us in our Old Testament reading, may He **cleanse and purify us** now, so that when He returns on the Last Day, we may be **gathered as wheat, not cast aside as chaff**.

That mighty deliverance didn't start out looking very mighty. A baby born in a manger. Dr. John locked away for speaking truth to power... And eventually beheaded. And then, most un-mighty of all, our GREAT Physician hung on a cross. This is the true face of sin. It's so destructive that it led us to kill the One who came to save us.

Yet, despite the apparent weakness, there was no brokenness of sin in Jesus. He was rejected by the world and considered worthless, but His Father knew His true worth. Death had no power over Him, and so it couldn't hold Him. This seemingly weak and meek Savior conquered death through His resurrection, and the promise that if death could not hold Him, then it will also not hold those who belong to Him... who are forgiven by Him... who are baptized into Him.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians in our epistle today, **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."** This is the gift we have in Jesus: GRACE and PEACE. The grace to heal our wounds and the peace that comes from knowing our sins are forgiven through Christ Jesus. We are no longer chaff, but wheat.

Paul assured the Philippians, **"I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."** The work begun in us through Baptism will be completed on the Last Day. Our spiritual death and resurrection in Baptism will be followed by our physical resurrection with Christ. We will be gathered to Him, not cast out.

You've heard the old adage about feeding a fever and starving a cold (or is it feeding a cold and starving a fever—who knows?). But when it comes to our spiritual sickness, sin, we must always "feed" our souls with the Body and Blood of Jesus. In the Lord's Supper, we find forgiveness, strength, life, and salvation. This spiritual nourishment not only heals us but also empowers us to break free from old sinful habits and bear the good fruit that God desires. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, may we be **filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ**—the fruit of His righteous life growing within us.

We may not enjoy going to the doctor, but thankfully, God has sent His own physician to us. Dr. John came to reveal our sin and point us to our Savior. He showed us our brokenness and offered the healing we desperately need.

This healing was fulfilled when the baby in the manger went to the cross. And the rescue we needed came when our crucified Savior rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, promising to return in glory.

That's the true meaning of Christmas that we once again prepare our hearts to celebrate. It's not just about Jesus' birth, but about why He came: It was **for you!** In the name of Jesus, Amen.