

“Serving the Real and Living Jesus”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of John of Damascus, Theologian and Hymnwriter (December 4)

Primary Text: Isaiah 11:1-10, St. Matthew 25:14-30

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. (Congregation may be seated)

And so, we begin a new chapter in the history of Christ the King Lutheran Church. One that sees our congregation meet at 3100 Ila Road, on the ground of the Double Oaks Golf Club. We live in a world of change. Some things are going to change, whether we want them to or not. Our physical address has changed, but the foundation on which we build upon has not. That foundation is the Lord, who changes not. Wherever our congregation meets, we will continue to, as our mission statement says, preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, teach the truth of God’s Word, and reach out in service to God and our community. As I said last week, our foundation and mission remains the same. The Word will continue to be preached and the Sacraments rightly administered, including on this very day.

We have now come to the Second Sunday of Advent and it falls on December 4 this year, which on the Church calendar is the Commemoration of John of Damascus, theologian and hymnwriter. Our sermon texts are the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 11 and Gospel from St. Matthew 25. The title of the sermon is “Serving the Real and Living Jesus”. GOD THE FATHER PROMISED TO SEND THE MESSIAH SO THAT WE MAY KNOW AND WORSHIP GOD IN THE FLESH, SERVING HIM WITH THE TALENTS THAT HE GIVES US.

John of Damascus is remembered today for his contributions to the Kingdom of God, especially in the areas of theology and hymn writing. This saint holds the distinction of being held in high regard by both the Western and Eastern branches

of Christianity. He is considered the “last great Greek Theologian” as no major theologians after him would write in Greek, the original language of the New Testament. We know a good bit about John of Damascus’ life after he was called to the ministry due to his prolific writings. We know less about his early life and like many early saints of the Church there are many legends that may or may not be true regarding him.

We know that John of Damascus was born in, surprise, Damascus, in either the year 675 or 676 AD. He was ethnically an Arab and born into a Christian family. While most Arabs today are Muslims, in the early Church many Arabs were Christians-some of the most ancient Christian communities are found in Arab-dominated areas. And there are still Arab Christians today, albeit many fewer than there were even 100 years ago. We should earnestly pray for the Church in the Middle East, as it has suffered long and intense persecution as of late. At the time of John of Damascus, Islam had stormed out of the Arabian Peninsula and conquered much territory. It was only 40 years earlier that Muslims armies had conquered Syria and its capital of Damascus. So, John grew up in a region that had once been predominantly Christian, but was now under Islamic control.

John’s family had remained faithful to Christ even as many were pressured to convert to Islam. His father was also named John, Sarjun in Arabic, and was successful financially. It is said that he would use his wealth to purchase the freedom of Christians who had been enslaved. In fact, he held an influential position in the court of the Islamic caliph-most likely as the keeper of financial records. John would follow in his father’s footsteps. This is one of the reasons the passage speaking about the wise use of the talents is the Gospel text for today.

But a life in finance was not the ultimate calling for John of Damascus. It would have been easy for him to continue in that path. It was a career that promised wealth and influence. It provided protection from persecution as it

involved working for the ruling Muslims. John had received a fine classical education and knew Greek. But John understood the deeper meaning of our Gospel text for today, the Parable of the Talents.

We can learn some helpful business principles from this parable in St. Matthew 25. If you are given a sum of money, it is very foolish to simply bury it in the ground and hide it out of fear of losing it. The servant who did this is condemned harshly when the master returns from the far country. But the first two servants are the ones that are commended as they took this money and made good business deals and thus doubled the amount of money that they had. Indeed there is a practical lesson to be learned here, but the parables primarily point us to spiritual truths. The master, as he always does in the parables, represents God. Jesus is going to go away to a far country when He ascends into heaven, but He will return one day-this Second coming that we look toward in Advent. He leaves His followers talents. Talents were literally Roman money, but what Jesus speaks of here are the gifts that He gives to His people-the most precious being the Gospel. We are not to hide the Gospel, but to spread it and increase the Kingdom. This is why the third servant who was so afraid and hid his talent is so harshly condemned. God had given him much and He did nothing with it.

John of Damascus was called into full time ministry. Money can be used to God's glory, but John knew that the talents that God had given him were more than financial. He wanted to make an eternal investment in the riches that thieves cannot steal and rust cannot corrupt. Around 716 John would enter a monastery near Jerusalem and afterwards be ordained.

As I said earlier, John of Damascus was a prolific theologian. He wrote on just about every theological topic imaginable. His most enduring work is called *The Fount of Wisdom*. While we would not agree with all of his theological positions as Lutherans, he was a strong defender of many orthodox doctrines

including the Trinity. One of the controversies that arose during John's lifetime had to deal with religious images and artwork.

The iconoclasts were strongly opposed to the use of religious art, paintings, and statues that depicted Jesus or even other Biblical figures. These are known as icons. John wrote extensively on the value of such images and that they in themselves were not sinful. This controversy would rage again during the Reformation. Some Reformation leaders opposed the use of images such as John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Martin Luther and the Lutherans did not agree that religious images were bad in themselves. Instead, we pointed out the abuses related to these images such as believing that the images had any power themselves. Religious art and icons have a place in the church, we have always taught, so long as their use does not violate what the Bible says. The problem arises when people begin to worship images rather than God. We would not go as far as John did in some of his statements about icons, but would agree to the extent that the church should not forbid them. John of Damascus wrote, *"I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of the matter who became matter for my sake, who worked out my salvation through matter."*

Let's delve into that a little bit. In our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 11 we see verses that are clearly prophecies concerning the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The rod out of the stem of Jesse, the branch that shall grow from its roots (v1) refers to Jesus who descended from the line of David, whose father was Jesse. This root of Jesse would be a Savior for Jew and Gentile alike (v10). Jesus is the promised Messiah in whom we look forward to celebrating His birth during this Advent season and we watch and pray for His return on the Last Day when people and even the animals will be at peace (v6-9) This Savior is not only Spirit, but has flesh and blood. As it said in verse 6, "and a little child shall lead them." The Second person of the Trinity, the Word, was made flesh and dwelt among us.

Miraculously conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary-Jesus is true God and true man. To be crystal clear, Jesus was not simply an icon-an image of God-but God Himself in the flesh. But the point is that if we were not to see God, then we would not have Jesus. Jesus is God in the flesh, a God that we can see, touch, talk to, and commune with. A God that worked our salvation through real flesh and blood, given at Calvary. So, when we see a painting of Jesus welcoming the little children or a crucifix depicting Him on the cross we do not worship the “matter” of that image, but worship the one whom the image represents. In fact, the whole of creation shows us the work of God. John of Damascus said, *“The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.”*

Finally, John of Damascus made big contributions in the areas of hymn writing and contributed to the liturgy of both the Eastern and Western Church. You may have thought it was a little unusual that we sang an Easter Hymn as our Hymn of the Day! One of the reasons I chose this hymn is that it was written by John of Damascus. It is a beautiful thing that we can join with Christians of now 14 centuries in lifting these same words of joyous celebration for the victory of our Savior over death. The most famous hymn that John wrote is #487 in our hymnal, also an Easter hymn, *Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain* but it is a little tough to sing so I went with *The Day of Resurrection*! And this is what it is about, Jesus who came to not only die but rise again in victory conquering death itself for Him and for us. Without Easter, there is no celebration of Christmas. The “little child” that Isaiah spoke of came as the Babe of Bethlehem and would grow up to die and to rise again. Thus, remembering this Easter victory during Advent and Christmas is definitely appropriate.

Today we remember John of Damascus as one who gave up earthly wealth to pursue and use the talents that God gifted him with. We remember his theological contributions and clear witness to God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. And

ultimately, we join with John in praising our risen and victorious Savior. *“Let all the world keep triumph And all that is therein Let all things, seen and unseen, their notes of gladness blend.”*

The peace of God, which passes all understand, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.