

Second Sunday of Advent
December 6 & 7, 2025
American Lutheran Church
Rev. Lisa Hackler

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Advent is the season of watching and waiting. The season of longing. The season of paying attention. And standing at the center of this season—every single year—is John the Baptist.

John appears out in the wilderness, dressed in camel hair, calling people to repent, preparing the way of the Lord. People go out to hear him. Crowds gather. His ministry is growing. And yet the most important thing about John is not how compelling he is—but what he refuses to become.

John refuses to be the Savior. When attention turns toward him, John doesn't soak it in. He does not take credit. He does not claim the spotlight. Instead, he says, "I baptize you with water—but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals."

John never loses the script. He is not the point. He is the pointer.

Now, I used to have two Brittany Spaniels. And even though they carry the name "spaniel," they are actually pointers. They were bred as bird dogs. Their instinct—deep in their bones—was to find the bird, stop, freeze, and point so the hunter would know where to look.

But my husband and I didn't hunt. So, these dogs grew up a little confused.

When they were young, they had endless energy and an unstoppable desire to play fetch. But what was most confusing for them was that instinct to point—without knowing *what* they were supposed to point at. So, I would find them frozen in perfect pointer form...pointing at frogs, at squirrels, at our bewildered cat, at my daughter's toys scattered across the living room floor.

They hadn't lost their instinct. They had lost the script.

And sometimes I wonder if the church can get confused in the very same way.

Not because we stop working.

Not because we stop loving.

Not because we stop doing good things.

But because we slowly start pointing at the wrong things. We start by pointing at how we're better than other churches. At how hard we work, at our programs, at our building, at our generosity, at how loving we are.

And all of those things can be good. Truly good. But if we're not careful, we forget who we're actually meant to be pointing to. John never made that mistake.

"I am not the one," he said. "The one who is coming is greater."

And the church, at its best, has always been called to live that same truth:

We are not the gospel. We carry the gospel. We witness to the gospel. We serve because of the gospel. But we are not the Savior.

And that is not a failure of the church—it is our freedom.

Because if the healing depends on us, we will collapse under the weight.

If salvation depends on us, we will burn out trying to be God.

But when we remember who we are—and who God is—ministry becomes what it was always meant to be: participation, not replacement.

Or as the Stephen Ministers have always said so simply and so honestly:

We care.

God cures.

That's why today, on Stephen Ministry Sunday, this gospel fits so perfectly.

Stephen Ministers are not saviors. They do not fix what only God can heal. They do not force suffering to disappear. They come alongside. They listen. They pray. They stay when things are messy. They stay when answers are few. They stay when grief is heavy and hope feels thin.

And in staying, they point.

They point to a God who has not abandoned.

They point to a Christ who has entered suffering.

They point to a Spirit who still comforts and strengthens.

Stephen Ministry does not exist to make the church look impressive.

It exists to make the love of God visible.

And that is the true measure of every ministry—not numbers, not recognition, not success—but does it point beyond itself to the love of God?

And then Isaiah dares to give us the vision of what all that pointing is *for*.

“The wolf shall live with the lamb.

The leopard shall lie down with the kid.

The calf and the lion together.

And a little child shall lead them.”

This is not sentimental poetry.

This is God’s promised future.

This is the peaceable kingdom.

This is the world as God intends it to be—where fear no longer rules, where harm no longer defines the story, where even the deepest instincts are healed.

Advent holds two truths at once:

That world is not fully here yet.

And that world has already begun.

Every prayer at a bedside.

Every visit to a care receiver.

Every meal delivered.

Every quiet conversation in the aftermath of loss.

Every faithful act of care becomes a small sign of God’s coming kingdom.

Stephen Ministry is not just about getting people through hard seasons.

It is about bearing witness to the future God has promised.

It says:

You are not alone.

This suffering is not the final word.

God is not finished yet.

Like John the Baptist...

Like the prophets...

Like every quiet saint who has ever walked beside another human being in pain...

The church exists to point.

Not to itself.

Not to its success.

Not to its strengths.

But to the One who is coming. To the One who is already here. To the One who is making all things new.

We are not Savior. But we know the Savior.

We are not the cure. But we know the One who heals.

We do not force the kingdom into being.

But we live as citizens of the kingdom already on the way.

And that is enough.

Because when the church remembers who it is—and who God is—our ministry becomes light enough to carry, strong enough to endure, and deep enough to matter.

Like John.

Like Stephen Ministers.

Like every one of us who points, again and again—not to ourselves—but to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.