

From the days he was in the womb, John testifies to the Christ. So when priests and Levites come from Jerusalem seeking to discern from John who he is, rather than notoriety, connections, or approval for himself, all John will say is that he is not the Christ. All he will claim to be is but the voice foretold by Isaiah the prophet, sent to prepare the way of the Lord. All John will do is direct his hearers' attention to the fact that not only is there a Christ, but He has arrived, is on the scene, there, in the midst of Israel.

And then John gives that damning warning that they do not even recognize the One in their midst. The hopes of their fathers, what the prophets had foretold, and Israel had so longed for, they are ignorant that He is now here. They are, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, a people walking in darkness. And though the apostle and evangelist John will tell us on Christmas morning that the great Light foretold by Isaiah shines in the darkness, **“the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him”** (1:9, 10b–11). It is the priests and Levites, the preachers and professional scholars of the Scriptures in Israel, who hear of John and see him fulfil in word and deed and appearance the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, and they do not know who he is or what he is doing.

So also today. For these past weeks and the next few days the name “Christ” is on many lips. They can't help it; it's the Christmas season after all. Despite past decades' attempts at political correctness to make the holiday season generic and happy for everyone, songs that proclaim “Christmas” fill the airwaves. The greeting “Merry Christmas” sounds forth countless times each day. That is good as far as it goes. Historically and culturally, Christmas is the reason for the joy and celebration this season.

And yet for all that, many, perhaps most, don't know the Christ whose name they have on their tongues. Christmas can apply just as well to Santa Claus, elves, reindeer, Whos in Whoville and the Grinch on Mount Crumpet, with nary a mention of anything to do with the Bible. Even fewer people have any idea what the “mass” of Christmas is. “Mass” is just another word for Divine Service, the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Linus Van Pelt gives beautiful witness to what Christmas is all about to Charlie Brown and those who will watch the 1965 special. But far more of the popular speaking of Christmas has no connection to it beyond the word. The peace and good will of God proclaimed by the angel is shouted down by the “magic” of the season that we are supposed to “believe.” The little Babe pushed aside by the belly of the jolly old elf.

But today, December 21st, the shortest day of the year, when darkness reigns supreme, on this day, the Church for over 1,500 years has prayed

O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

We cry out and look toward the One whom John announces. His light increases. Not just the sun in the heavens, which He now causes to shine more and more, delivering us from the depressing and cold darkness, leading us to Spring and Summer. We pray His light, the true light which lightens all men, from the first Christmas night on to this very day, for that light to increase and illumine those who are in darkness.

The voice still cries out, sounds forth to those who do not recognize the Christ whose name is on their lips, directs them to Him by preaching repentance and faith. John calls himself a voice crying out in the wilderness. John did this literally. He fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40 which foretold him. He is the one whom the prophet said would do that in the desolate spaces of Judea.

But what John says he is doing, crying out in the wilderness to level every lofty place and raise up what is lowly, there he's not talking about the wilderness of Judea by the Jordan River and changing spatial elevation. He's not talking about a certain geographical place or a particular task at a specific time. He's talking about the wilderness in which all of sinful humanity finds itself, and what always needs to be done that men might recognize the Christ in their midst. This is biblical talk. Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise and into the wilderness of the fallen world because of their sin. The people of Israel wandered the wilderness for 40 years before entering the promised land, because they were disobedient. Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. The wilderness is where the devil is, where the curse is. It's the world of sin and its delusions. It's the world of death and temptation and pain. It's our world, the wilderness we live in.

No one is going to hear and pay attention to a voice crying in the wilderness if he thinks he's in a paradise. No one longs for the light who is happy and content in darkness. Where there's no recognition of our sin, no fear of God's wrath and judgment, no realization of the curse of death upon us, people aren't going to listen to the voice that calls men to repentance. That's why people don't go to church, whether on Christmas or any other time. They don't think they have a problem, don't know the depth of the cause of their problem, don't know the darkness in which they dwell, or they don't think the Church has the answer to it.

This is why the voice crying in the wilderness is not always pleasant. God sent John and He sends every faithful preacher to speak the word that shows the wilderness for what it is. And this word is specific. It's not simply a general proclamation that you are sinners. John ended up in prison for the specificity of his preaching: he told King Herod that he had sinned by taking his brother's wife as his own. John said the ax is laid to the roots of the tree, and everyone who does not repent will be cut down. He told tax collectors to stop stealing, soldiers to stop bullying.

So what's your lack, what is it that makes your life a desert? Have you lusted for what is not yours? Have you envied what other people have, as if God is not taking care of you? Have you nursed your pride and been angry with people for trivial, foolish reasons? Have you drunk too much? Eaten too much? Have you gossiped about others instead of defending them and speaking well of them? Have you been afraid of dying because you treasure this life? Have you doubted God and His promises? Have you ignored your Creator? Have you been obsessed with the trivialities of the secular Christmas season and worried about money? Whatever it is the voice cries in the wilderness, "**Repent.**"

Make straight the way of the Lord. That's what John preaches, what God told him to preach and that same message is for you. How can you possibly make straight the way of the Lord? Jesus is the Way. That's what Christmas is all about. You see the wilderness of your life, the sin, the pain, the death, and you need a way through it, and Jesus comes. He doesn't demand that you make up for your sin. He doesn't insist that you turn the desert into a paradise. He knows very well you can't. He comes to sinners who know their sin and want to do better but cannot find it in themselves to be pure and holy. He comes to mortals who cannot take away the curse of death. And He comes with love and forgiveness and with life everlasting and peace with God.

Look who this is who comes to you. **“There stands one among you...who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”** He is God. He is our Creator. He is the Almighty. He is the everlasting Son of the Father. And He stands among us. Not to condemn us or punish us, but to save us. He was born as a little baby on Christmas. He came to bear our sins on the cross. John points to Jesus and says, **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”**

There stands One among us whom we do know. He is our Savior. He is Christ our Lord. We have His name on our lips this Christmas and we know Him, because He has come to us. He became a child for us. He was tempted in the wilderness for us. He took our curse, died our death, bore our sins, and He gives us life. We celebrate Christmas and we take the name of Christ on our lips and we rejoice always.

If you are mourning a death this Christmas, Christ was born to conquer death. If you are lonely, He was born that He might be with you and He has given you a family in His Church. If you are dealing with sickness and pain, He has borne that too and will relieve you. There is nothing that can rob you of the joy He brings, life eternal, peace with God. So keep His name on your lips and receive His body and His blood and give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His mercy endureth forever.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!