

## Sermon for Advent 4 – John 1:19-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

John confessed. He did not deny. He confessed. He was not the Christ. He was a voice. His voice was not the Christ's, but He does speak for Christ.

He won't deny that. He will not back down from that. His words are God's words. So when he confesses that he is not the Christ, he is by no means denying that what he says is true. He knows he speaks the truth that is from God. He is a voice from God.

John did not claim any special status for himself, but he did claim divine authority for what he said. John himself is not a big deal—he isn't even worthy of tying or untying Christ's shoes. He's nothing in himself. He's not Elijah. He's not the Prophet. He's nobody special.

But he speaks the Word of God. That's why we listen to what he says. So what does he say? He says what God through the prophet Isaiah gave him to say: "Make straight the way of the Lord."

John is preparing the way for the Christ. Mary's Son is also the God of Israel. The very God who spoke by the prophets appears among us. "Make straight the way of the Lord."

John is but a voice. He calls no one to follow himself. He directs everyone who hears his voice to the Christ. But if this is so, then why does he baptize? Clearly baptism means being baptized into something or someone. There is no such thing as a generic baptism. Baptism always has a brand name. But who is John? What brand is he? Not the Christ? Not Elijah? Not the Prophet? Just a voice? Why, then, John, do you baptize? What kind of baptism do you do?

There were many different kinds of ceremonial washings back in John's day. They were human customs that had no divine command or divine promise. They were merely symbolic. They did not give the forgiveness of sins. They were a reminder of purity and holiness, but could not give purity and holiness.

Yet, something new happens when John comes onto the scene. And you can see why this John the Baptizer is causing a stir. The common consensus was that purity and holiness come from Jerusalem's temple... not out in the desert. So you can see why Pharisees wonder about John.

He gives a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which was more than symbolic. Through faith, John's baptism actually delivered something real: purity and holiness for those who received it. John's baptism was a means by which salvation could happen.

What's more, John's baptism was for everyone. He baptized one and all who came to him—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, old and young. John's baptism was for everyone because everyone needed to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins God gave. "Make straight the way of the Lord." This was the only way to meet the Lord who was coming.

The voice of the one crying in the desert teaches us that we are all in the same boat. We all have the same need. We need to prepare for the coming of God in the flesh. God came in the flesh at Christmas. This same God in the flesh came thirty years later preaching the Gospel of the kingdom. This same God in the flesh comes to us today in the Sacrament of the Altar and we prepare to receive Him in the words of Advent's proper preface, "Whose way John the Baptist prepared, proclaiming Him the promised Messiah, the very Lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance, that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when He comes again in glory."

I've been a Christian all my life. I was baptized as an infant. My father is a Christian, his father was a Christian, and so on and so on as far back as our family can be traced. They were all baptized. They all received Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. They all confessed the pure Gospel as taught in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in Luther's Small Catechism. Yes, I've been a Christian all my life and I know of no time that I did not know that Jesus was my Savior from sin and that I am saved through faith in Him alone.

I'm not saying this to brag. I'm not saying this to affirm myself in some "once saved, always saved" security. I'm saying these things to drive home the point that John still cries out to me: "Make straight the way of the Lord." And he cries out to you, too. John's call is universal and constant. It's a call to be cried out until Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. All of us need to repent and we need to die this death every day of our lives.

Listen to the voice of John. When he said, "Make straight the way of the Lord," he wasn't talking about a one-time decision we make. And he wasn't saying that we make it possible for the Lord to come to us by making His way straight, as if He cannot come to us without our help!

Listen to John. Repentance is not a one-time thing. Repentance is lifelong. Baptism is a one-time thing. God baptizes us once and that is enough. However, living the baptized life of repentance and faith does not end on this side of eternity. Baptism in Christ is graciously lived out every day of our lives.

Christ comes to forgive sinners. If you won't acknowledge yourself as a sinner, you cannot know Him. Only sinners need a Savior. Only sinners can be saved from their sins. Only sinners who know they are sinners want forgiveness from Him who comes to save.

"Make straight the way for the Lord." Confess your sins to God. Have you disobeyed those whom God has set over you to honor and obey? Have you broken promises that you've made? Have you hurt someone by what you've said or done? Have you taken what you had no right to take? Have you forgotten to do what you're supposed to do? Have you lied? Have you served yourself when God told you to serve those for whom you work and live?

Confess your sins to God. Don't hold on to them, thinking that you can do what you want to do because it really won't matter. You may be a Christian, but you're still a sinner. And God doesn't call on us sinners to complain about how hard life is for us. He calls on them to repent. Confess. Lay your burden of sin before the throne of God's grace.

And one more important thing. Take God's Word to heart. He forgives you for His Son's sake. The Worthy One comes for us unworthy ones. Your faith doesn't trust in your decision for Jesus. It trusts in His decision for you. He decided to take upon himself your body and blood. He received your human nature from His mother Mary, while still being preserved from original sin. He led a life of obedience and self-sacrificing love. He avoided all sin. He lived the only sinless life ever lived. And He lived it for you. On the cross, the Lord who became flesh, whose shoes no mere man is worthy to untie, took upon Himself our shame and sin.

Now He comes to us and gives us the treasures He purchased for us by His holy life and death. He chooses us as His own in Holy Baptism. In His Supper, He gives us to eat and drink of the same body and blood by which He procured our salvation. Every time we hear the voice of His Gospel, we hear Him. He is not ashamed to claim us. He remains Immanuel, God with us, forever. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠