

The Fourth Sunday in Advent – Pr. Faugstad sermon
John 1:19-28: “Make Straight the Way of the Lord.”
December 17/18, 2022 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Stir up our hearts, we beseech You, almighty God, to heed the message of John the Baptist so we may prepare the way for the Lord by sincere repentance and in true faith receive the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, that we may continue in the confession of His name to the end and finally, with John and all the saints, receive the crown of victory and glory, for Jesus’ sake. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, p. 419)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus’ name:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” / And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” / “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” / So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” / (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands One you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who “comes to judge the nations, a terror to His foes,” but “a Light of consolations and blessed hope to those who love the Lord’s appearing” (ELH 94, v. 10), dear fellow redeemed:

I imagine you have a busy week ahead. There will be gifts to wrap and food to make. Maybe there is more decorating to do and cards or letters to send. This is a time of preparation, a time to get everything ready for the big day: Christmas. Perhaps you hope to recapture the feeling of the season from when you were a child, or you want your children or grandchildren to have that feeling now. This is a special time. You want everything to be just right.

Advent is a time of preparation, but the focus is not especially on external things, what is happening around us. The focus is internal, what is happening inside us. The problem with internal things is that they are more difficult to control. I can spend hours wrapping gifts and make them just the way I want them. I can clean my house from top to bottom. I can put everything in its place around me and make it look like I have every detail covered. I can do all these things while being torn up inside by sadness, by pain, by guilt.

That might be where you are right now. That is why Jesus comes to you today. He comes to meet you in your struggle and lift your burdens from you. He comes to bring you forgiveness and hope, comfort and strength. He comes to assure you that you have a merciful Father who loves you and cares for you, and that in His Father's house are many mansions where He has prepared a place for you (Joh. 14:2).

These are the things that Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, came down to earth to do. John was sent to prepare the people for His coming. He was the "voice" prophesied more than 700 years earlier by Isaiah, the voice who would cry out, *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain"* (Isa. 40:3-4). How exactly was that highway making—that raising of valleys and lowering of mountains—supposed to come about?

The evangelist Luke writes that John *"went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (3:3). And John didn't hold back in his Law preaching. *"You brood of vipers!"* he said to the crowd. *"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance"* (3:7-8). Repentance was the way the people were to prepare for Christ's coming. It was the way for their hearts and minds to become open to His gracious teaching.

And that is still the way we prepare for Christ's coming: we repent of our sins. We repent of our valleys of doubt and despair, and we repent of our mountains of pride. But we wouldn't know this was even necessary if God did not give us His Law. His Law is both written on our hearts and recorded for us in the Bible. There is no question what God's will is for our lives. There is also no question that we have failed to live up to His Law—failed completely.

But the error we often fall into is measuring our holiness not against God's Commandments, but against the lives of other sinners. And we can always find others who appear to be more sinful than we are. This is a trick of the devil to get us to think that we are not that bad, that our lives are pretty well in order. But if that were true, then why did Jesus come? Did He come to hang out with the righteous people, or to save sinners? Jesus said, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance"* (Luk. 5:31-32).

The holy Law of God shows us how sick we are. It shows us how bumpy our road was in the past when we disobeyed God's commands and how bumpy it will be in the future if we give in to our sinful desires. And through the Law, the Holy Spirit works repentance in our hearts today. He moves us to contrition, to remorsefulness and sorrow, for the wrongs we have done—for the sins we have tried to hide and the sins we have committed right out in the open.

But repentance is not just about admitting sin. It is about avoiding the same temptations going forward. It is about not giving the devil an inch, because he will take a mile and usually a lot more. What good is repentance if you have no desire to stop sinning and do better? John said to the crowd, *"Bear fruits in keeping with repentance."* Show in your life how sorry you are for your sin and how you want to live for the God who made you and provides for you.

The people must have trembled when they heard John preach. He was great and powerful in their eyes. They trembled even more when he told them One was coming after him, *"the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."* *"I baptize you with water,"* said John. *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"* (Luk. 3:16,17). In other words, *"Don't ignore my warning. Don't let this fall on deaf ears. A far more powerful One than me is coming."*

John was a serious preacher, but it was not all gloom and doom. The baptism he administered was given for spiritual comfort. God's Law was doing its work. The people were sorry for their sins. Now they stepped forward to the Jordan River desiring to receive God's forgiveness. They believed what John said. They did not want to be caught unprepared when the Christ came. They sincerely wanted to *"make straight the way of the Lord."*

But would the way be straight enough for Him? Would He be pleased with what He saw in them? Would they be worthy enough, welcoming enough? Those would have been natural questions to ask, but they were the wrong ones. We get sidetracked in the same way. We want to live our lives for the Lord, but then we focus more on our living than on the Lord. We focus more on our work than on His work.

But it is His work that saves. No matter how well or how much you prepare for Jesus' coming to you now, it is not enough. You have fallen short of the glory of God. That is why God sent His only-begotten Son. Jesus came to perfectly do for you what you could not do. He had no need to repent, because He was sinless. He *could* measure His holiness against the Law of God, and it did not condemn Him. Those valleys of doubt and despair, those mountains of pride, could not be found in Jesus. He kept God's holy Law for you down to the smallest detail.

And He put all your Law-breaking, all your sin, on His shoulders and invited God's wrath on Himself to spare you from eternal punishment in hell. That is where the Lord's greatness is most clearly seen—in His suffering on the cross. That is where His glory is found, hidden beneath a crown of thorns and behind all that anguish and shame.

You have a Savior who knows sadness. Isaiah described Him as *"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"* (Isa. 53:5). You have a Savior who knows pain, who knows guilt, because He took all of yours on Himself. Isaiah says again, *"[H]e was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace"* (v. 5). This is the peace the incarnate Son of God came to bring, the *"peace on earth"* that the multitude of angels sang about the night of His birth.

It is the peace He wants you to have in this busy season no matter what troubles you, grieves you, or weighs you down right now. Jesus came for your sake. He came to save you. He came to redeem your soul by shedding His holy blood and remove your transgressions from you as far as the east is from the west (Psa. 103:12).

His forgiveness of our sins is why we don't view repentance as a chore. Repentance is a gift worked in us by the Holy Spirit which prepares us to receive God's greater gifts—the gifts of

His righteousness, peace, and life. He gives these blessings to us now and assures us that we will have them forever in heaven.

So by the power of the Holy Spirit, we **“Make Straight the Way of the Lord”** today. We push away all doubt. We set aside all pride. We hand over to God everything that has caused anguish and pain to ourselves and to others. And our merciful Lord says, “I forgive you all your sins. I made payment for them long ago by My precious blood. All that I won for you, all that I have, I poured over you at your Baptism. There, I made you My own.”

Your Baptism into Christ means that even though you may feel empty at times, you are not empty. And even though you may feel alone, you are not alone. The Christ, your Savior, has come, and He still comes with gracious tidings of comfort and joy for you.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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