

Rorate coeli
St. John 1:19-28
December 24th, 2023
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

The Witness of John

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon Text:

“And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, ‘Who art thou?’ And he confessed, and denied not; and he confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Art thou Elijah?’ And he saith, ‘I am not.’ ‘Art thou the prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ They said therefore unto him, ‘Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?’ He said, “‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,” as said Isaiah the prophet.”

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

Lord God, heavenly Father, we give Thee hearty thanks that for a comfort to us poor sinners Thou hast ordained and sent Thy Son as a righteous King and Savior to redeem His people from sins, from the power of the devil, and from eternal death; and we most heartily beseech Thee, so enlighten and govern us by Thy Holy Spirit that we may ever know and confess Christ to be our King and Savior, and, firmly trusting in Him alone, obtain eternal life; through the same Thy dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear friends, Advent is the season of St. John the Baptist, for this season goes before the season of the Incarnation of the Christ—the Mass of the Christ, Christmas. Advent prepares the way for Christmas, the birth of our Lord God in our flesh. And St. John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord + Jesus by preaching about His coming. Last week we heard about St. John the Baptist in prison, near the end of his life. He prepared the way before the Lord by sending two of his disciples to the Lord so that they might learn from Him that He was indeed the Coming One, and they should not look for another. Today, we hear from St. John the Baptist himself. We see him by the Jordan River in Bethany, our translation says, or Bethabara, as other translations say. We see and hear from him in the midst of his ministry, before the coming of the Lord + Jesus. In fact, in the next section of the Apostle and Evangelist St. John’s Gospel, our Lord + Jesus shows up to be baptized by St. John the Baptist.

If St. John the Baptist is one who is to go before the Lord to prepare His way, the question that needs to be asked is, “How does he prepare the Lord’s way?” That is shown us in the questioning of the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem. “Who art thou?” they ask. Now, it is a good reminder to us of who St. John the Baptist was, that is, who his parents were. His father was Zacharias, a priest of the division of Abijah, the Evangelist St. Luke tells us. His mother, Elisabeth, was a daughter of Aaron, the first high priest. Meaning, St. John the Baptist was a Levite. He was from a household of priests. He himself was a priest and Levite. These priests and Levites sent from the Pharisees in Jerusalem most likely knew him. If they did not know St. John the Baptist personally, they would have at least

known his parents, who were a priest of the division of Abijah and a daughter of Aaron the high priest. In reality, there is no need to ask, “Who art thou?” for they would already know who he was.

This is why St. John the Baptist answers the way that he does. He does not say, “I am the son of Zacharias, a priest of the division of Abijah.” He does not say, “I am the son of Elisabeth, a daughter of Aaron the high priest.” No, he sees through their veiled question and answers it truthfully, “I am not the Christ.” As Martin Luther points out in his sermon on this text (and the excerpt of that sermon is found in the announcements in the bulletin) it was only necessary for St. John the Apostle and Evangelist to write that St. John the Baptist confessed the truth. But he repeats it, “He confessed, and denied not.” St. John the Evangelist is emphatic in St. John the Baptist’s denial of him being the Christ. And St. John the Evangelist would know, for he himself was a disciple of St. John the Baptist first before being an Apostle of the Lord + Jesus.

This Gospel reading begins with the words, “And this is the witness of John.” This pericope is all about St. John the Baptist’s witness of the Christ; it is all about his preaching about the coming of the Christ. He only preached about the One Who was standing in the midst of them, the latchet of Whose shoes he was not worthy to unloose. He did not preach himself. He did not preach to gain favor for himself. He preached to point people to the One, True Source of redemption, to the Lord + Jesus, Who was to come. Who indeed was standing in the midst of them, and Who would return on the morrow to be baptized by St. John the Baptist. And would return on the next morrow, and St. John the Evangelist would leave the other John and follow the Lord + Jesus.

This is the witness of John: he points to the Christ; he does not point to himself. This is shown to us on the bulletin cover image: John pointing upward to heaven. He is pointing out that the Messiah will be sent from the Lord God. Indeed, the Messiah is the Lord God—our Lord + Jesus—in our flesh. St. John points to the One God Who would come down from His throne in heaven and take upon Himself our flesh. This is why St. John is not worthy to unloose the latchet of the Lord’s shoes, for he is just a man, but the Messiah, the Coming One, is both the Lord God and man.

St. John the Baptist baptized with water, that is why he is called “the Baptist.” It has nothing to do with his religion. He baptized the people with water as a symbol of their forgiveness. But the Lord + Jesus when He comes would baptize with the Holy Ghost. His baptize would actually confer forgiveness upon all those who received it and believed that this baptized did indeed save them. We have all been baptized with this baptism.

We are reminded of this baptism at the beginning of every Divine Service when the minister blesses us with the Invocation, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Martin Luther urges us in the Small Catechism to remind ourselves daily of this forgiveness bestowed upon us by making the sign of the cross often: when we arise and before we go to sleep. The Name which has been placed upon us in Holy Baptism, the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, should be on our lips often as a reminder that we have been forgiven by the Lord God Himself through His washing of water and the Word.

This is the witness of John. He points to this One Who would bring forgiveness to all those who were baptized in His Name. For through the baptism of the Lord + Jesus we are buried with Him in His death. We are drowned and killed in those waters. The Old Man full of sin and death is drowned and destroyed, so that through the work of the Holy Ghost we are made a new creation once again. We can make ourselves a new creation—we can drown the Old Adam in us once again—whenever we make the sign of the holy cross and remind ourselves that we have been baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. By this Name we have been made children of the heavenly Father. By this Name we have been cleansed of our sins and made a new person robed in the righteousness of the Christ, who suffered and died for our sins on the tree of the holy cross, Who is the

perfect and innocent sacrifice for us poor, miserable sinners.

This is the witness and testimony of St. John the Baptist. This is the witness that goes before the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. He is not the Christ. He confessed and denied not. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, the wilderness beyond the Jordan in Bethany, "Make straight the way of the Lord" as said Isaiah the prophet. The crooked path is made straight when we are pointed to our one and only Savior and Redeemer, our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. On account of our sins our path is very crooked, but our Lord + Jesus has come down from Heaven and taken upon Himself our flesh, so that He might perfectly fulfill the Law of God which we break daily and suffer our punishment on the tree of the holy cross.

This is the One in Whom is salvation. This is the Only One in Whom is salvation. This is the Savior to Whom St. John the Baptist points. It is the Savior to Whom all faithful ministers of the Lord God point. If a minister points you to something other than the Christ, mark and avoid him. For salvation is not found in our good behavior, or our giving up of a certain sin, or our earthly blessings. Salvation is found through the suffering and death of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ alone.

This is the witness of John, for he confessed and denied not, "I am not the Christ." The Christ is the One standing in our midst. He stood in the midst of the people of Israel listening to the preaching of St. John the Baptist before He revealed Himself by being baptized and having the Holy Ghost descend upon Him like a dove and having the Voice from Heaven declare Him to be the Son of God in Whom the Lord God was well-pleased. He now stands in the midst of us through the pure preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the Blessed Sacraments just as He instituted them. He is our Savior from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He has come to us to give to us forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation through the means of grace.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us confess Him and deny Him not. For He is our one and only Savior and Redeemer that rescues us from the bondage of our sins. He frees us from the prison of death and gives us eternal life with Him. He has baptized us with water and the Word, and He gives us to eat of His Body and Blood in bread and wine for the remission of our sins. He has declared us to be forgiven of all our sins through the declaration of the minister in the words of the Absolution, so that all of us who heartily repent of our sins, and cling in faith to Him have the forgiveness of our sins.

St. John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord before His coming to fulfill the work which the heavenly Father gave Him to do. We are now being prepared through the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Blessed Sacraments for His coming again on the Last Day. On that Day He will call us all out of our graves, and give to us new and glorious bodies, and welcome us into the eternal heavenly realm to live with Him and all the saints and angels of Heaven forever and ever. Thanks be to the Lord God for His wonderful gift! In the Name of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Almighty God, be pleased to accompany Thy Word with Thy Holy Spirit and grant that Thy Word would increase faith in us; bring into the Way of Truth all such as have erred; turn the hearts of the unrepentant; and for sake of Thy Name grant succor to all heavy hearts and those who are heavy-laden, that they may through the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ be relieved and preserved so that they succumb not to the temptation of despair but rather that they gain the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with the Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!