

John 1:19–28
Rorate Coeli (Advent IV)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 18, 2022

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Who is John the Baptist? Many people don't understand his significance. John can come across as an eccentric figure, like many of the Old Testament prophets or like a street preacher. He dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and honey while preaching some uncomfortable truths about repentance. John called the crowd a "brood of vipers" (Luke 3:7) and predicted imminent destruction. Yet the people flocked to John the Baptist, some to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, others to see what this spectacle was all about. For those in positions of power among the people of Israel, John the Baptist needed to be addressed. He could either be a huge blessing or a huge curse, but either way, everyone knew John the Baptist was important. Anyone with a large following could either help or harm those with power and prestige, so the Pharisees sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem out into the country, to the Jordan River, to find out who exactly this John the Baptist was. First, John tells the delegation who he is not. Then he tells them who he is: the voice of one crying out in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord. John's message is the same message the church hears and preaches today in the desert of this world: Repent . . . among you stands one you do not know, our Lord Jesus Christ.

During his interrogation, John confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." The title "Christ" in Hebrew is "Messiah," and literally means "anointed one," that is, a person anointed with oil for a specific task. In the Old Testament, prophets like Elisha were anointed (1 Kg 19:16; 1 Chron 16:22). So were priests, including Aaron and his sons (Ex 28:41;

40:13–15). Kings, also, were anointed for their designated tasks. When David was chosen from among his brothers to be king, the prophet Samuel anointed him “and the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 2:4; 5:3). Prophets, priests, and kings were all anointed with oil as a sign of God’s promises through them. In that way, the anointed prophets, priests, and kings were pictures of the true anointed one, the Messiah to come. The Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah, the Anointed One to rescue them from their enemies. John the Baptist confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

The priests and the Levites then ask John: “What then? Are you Elijah? John the Baptist certainly acted like the prophet Elijah, the Tishbite. Just like Elijah, John the Baptist wore a hairy garment with a leather belt around his waist (2 Kg 1:8; Matt 3:4). You also might recall from the Old Testament that the prophet Elijah did not die. He was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). That’s why the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, predicted that Elijah would return as a forerunner of the Messiah. In the last two verses of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, ch. 4, God says “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction (Malachi 4:5-6).” This conclusion to Old Testament prophecy pointed to a return of Elijah, and in a sense John the Baptist did fulfill this prophecy (Matthew 17:12; Mark 9:13). He was the forerunner of Jesus Christ in the *power* and *spirit* of Elijah (Luke 1:17). But John the Baptist was not Elijah in the sense the priests and Levites had in mind. He was not Elijah reincarnate, and so John answered the question “Are you Elijah?” with a clear “I am not.”

The priests and the Levites then ask John: “Are you the Prophet?” Jesus calls John the Baptist “more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9), but here the religious teachers of Israel are

referring to God's promise in Deuteronomy 18, our Old Testament Lesson for this morning, God's promise of *the* prophet to come who is greater than Moses. There, Moses tells the people: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to Him you shall listen . . . And I will put my words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him." Again, the priests and Levites wanted to know if John the Baptist was the coming one, the promised one who would lead Israel. But John is not the prophet to come. He only points to Jesus, the one who is greater than the prophet Moses (Heb 3:5–6).

John the Baptist is not the Christ. He is not Elijah reincarnate or the Prophet to come. So who is John the Baptist? The priests and Levites ask: "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John the Baptist cites Isaiah chapter 40[:3]: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" John sees Himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. John is calling himself a preacher of repentance. He is the one crying out in the wilderness to straighten up and prepare the way for the arrival of the King. Every valley, everything that is lacking, is to be filled in. Every mountain, every excess, is to be whittled down. What is uneven and rough is to be smoothed out in preparation for the Christ, the anointed Savior of Israel and the world.

John is preaching that our hearts need to be worked on in preparation to receive good things from our heavenly Father. In that way, God's Word is like a hammer that breaks our stony hearts (Jer 23:29) into pieces. God's Word is the tool God uses, spoken through the mouths of His prophets, to crush our self-estimation, the very thing preventing us from receiving Christ. John the Baptist is calling all the people, including you, to repentance, to recognize who you are

in light of God's Word as sinners. And then "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Is 40:5).

The delegation of priests and Levites sent from the Pharisees still didn't get it. They ask John the Baptist: "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" They don't understand John's baptism of repentance looking ahead to the forgiveness of sins coming in the anointed Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. John answers: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John the Baptist had a large following. He was a popular preacher among the people. That's why the priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to figure out what John was all about. Yet John the Baptist sees himself as only preparatory to the Christ, who is already on the scene and standing in their very midst. John is simply preparing the people, revealing their sin before the revealing of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world in His life and in His death on the cross.

When John says he is not worthy even to untie the sandal straps of this shadowy figure, he is highlighting his position as lower than a slave. It was a slave's job to untie his master's shoes and wash his master's feet. So who is John the Baptist? He's not even worthy to be the Messiah's slave. In comparison to the Christ, John is less than nothing. The one who comes after John, Jesus Christ, ranks before John because Jesus was actually before John, in eternity, at the Father's side. John the Baptist is merely a voice, the voice of one calling in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. But Jesus is the very Word of God, through whom all things were created, the Word that became flesh and dwells among us. John simply baptizes with a baptism of repentance, preparing the people for the one who would baptize with water and the Holy

Spirit. John is the voice proclaiming the Word—not the Christ, but the one preparing the way for Christ.

The role of the Church today is a similar role to that of John the Baptist, but on the other side of our Lord's earthly life. Like John the Baptist, we are not the focus. Jesus is. We are not worthy even to be his slaves, yet He makes us sons of God. Like John the Baptist, the Church is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness of this world and among ourselves in the church: "Make straight the way of the Lord." Repent of your sins! Among you stands one you do not know, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are a voice, but Jesus is the Word, the one speaking in His Word in the Church and in the world today. Like John the Baptist, we, the Church, direct people to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The glory of the Lord has been revealed in the Word of God made flesh to die for the sins of the world. The glory of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken; the mouth of the Lord continues speaking, in the Word of God proclaimed even today. Our risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ is coming soon, not just as a baby in Bethlehem, but "with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him." So prepare the way before Him. Repent of your sins and lift up your heads. Your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.