

The Voice Crying In The Wilderness.

Text: John 1:19-28

1) Only a voice in the wilderness

Suggested Hymns:

2) But a voice with an important message

11, 115, 13, 12, 19

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 1:19-28, ¹⁹ *Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"* ²⁰ *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* ²¹ *And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."* *"Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."*

²² *Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"* ²³ *He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD,"" as the prophet Isaiah said."*

²⁴ *Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees.* ²⁵ *And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"* ²⁶ *John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.* ²⁷ *"It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose."* ²⁸ *These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Five hundred years before the birth of the Saviour the Prophet Malachi proclaimed: ***"Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me."***¹ This prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of John the Baptist.

The aged father Zechariah clearly understood this when, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he said of John, ⁷⁶ ***"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the***

Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, ” To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins.”²

Zechariah and Elizabeth undoubtedly kept the purpose and mission of their child always before him. Daily they recalled the great event which had occurred in Bethlehem of Judea shortly after his own birthday. They also constantly held before him the great salvation which Jesus brought to all the world. Thus the meaning of Christmas became very real to him.

John knew that he stood on the threshold of the New Testament. He knew that the Saviour was already among His people, although He had not yet begun His public ministry. John was still going before Jesus preparing the way. This he did so well that the Saviour Himself said of John in Matthew 11:11, “***Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.***”

The true greatness of John lay in his deep humility. Although high honours were heaped upon him, he wanted to be only the “***voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.***” Christmas cannot be real and lasting to us without listening to this voice. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Voice Of One Crying In The Wilderness Only A Voice In The Wilderness

John the Baptist wanted to be only a voice. He made nothing of his person. In his mode of living, in his dress, and in his food all pretence of greatness was set aside. He had not sought a favoured place at the king’s palace or in Jerusalem. His was the rugged life of one who subsists on what the wilderness has to offer. And there in the wilderness of Judea, along the Jordan, we find him carrying on his prophetic work.

The Sanhedrin Questions John

He was only a voice. But people of every rank and station in life came out to hear him. The Baptism of John at Bethabara became the talk of the nation. Before very long even the citizens of Jerusalem flocked out to hear this strange prophet. With so much popularity and publicity heaped upon John, the Jewish Council could not stand idly by lest this movement get out of hand. They decided to send priests and Levites to ask the direct question, “***Who are you?***”

The real significance of the question, of course, was, “*Are you perhaps the Messiah, the Christ?*” John had certain qualities which might have fitted him for the role which they hoped the Messiah would play. They needed a strong leader to rouse the people against their oppressors. But to their question, John’s answer was short and clear, “*I am not the Christ.*”

Their second question was, *Are you Elijah?* This question was prompted by the prophecy in Malachi which tells of the return of Elijah before the coming of the great day of the Lord. The Jews looked for an early return of Elijah and for the destruction of the enemies by means of fire which the returning Elijah would rain down upon the enemies of God.

John could rightly have said that the prophecy of Malachi was indeed fulfilled in him, just as Jesus later referred to John as Elijah when He told the people, ¹⁴ “*And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.*” ¹⁵ “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*”³ Because they had mistaken notions about Elijah, John again had a curt “*I am not*” to their question.

Their third question, *Are you the Prophet?* undoubtedly referred to the prophecy of Moses. Moses had told Israel in Deuteronomy 18:15, ¹⁵ *The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear.* Many of the Jews thought that this might be Jeremiah or some other great Prophet who would return to restore their kingdom. Again John bluntly answers, “No.” No, he was not Jeremiah nor “that Prophet” whom Moses had in mind.

John’s Humility Should Be Imitated

We marvel at the humility of John the Baptist. Before him stands a delegation of the highest authority of the Jews offering John every conceivable honour. If he had had ambitions, he might not only have been a great prophet, but a king in Israel, yes, Christ Himself. But John casts all this aside. He is satisfied to be only a voice in the wilderness.

What a lesson in humility for us! We live in an age of pride and haughtiness, of which we find indications on every hand. The seeking after wealth is frequently motivated only by the desire to outdo the neighbour, to be better clothed, to be better housed, to drive a sportier car, to belong to a more exclusive club.

The desire to acquire a better education is at times prompted solely by the desire for more titles, more degrees, more honour, and more self-glory. If asked, “*Who are you?*” most people would be very much concerned to have a complete list of their accomplishments recorded. Such an attitude is the very opposite of that which we find in John. Very few people can lay claim to such a humility as he exhibited.

Ignorance Is The Cause Of Pride

What is the underlying cause of pride among men? Generally it is the ignorance of their own true condition. They do not see themselves as they really are. With the Laodiceans they boastfully say, “*I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.*”⁴

Because they are not murderers, thieves, whoremongers, they think that all is well with them. Yes, they look at themselves and at their own accomplishments with much satisfaction. No worse than others, and even a little better than some — hence all is well.

But God, who looks into the secrets of the hearts of men, sees nothing good in them at all. He says in Revelation 3:17, *you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.* Not until people learn to confess with St. Paul: “*I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing,*”⁵ will they come down from their pedestal of self-righteousness.

Only those who have learned from Scripture that their own righteousnesses are only filthy rags and whose conscience has caused them to cry out in fear and trembling, “*Lord, save us; we perish!*” will be able to stand humbly before the Saviour, as did John. May God give us such a humble spirit, because only then will we be ready to hear the voice.

John wanted to be only a voice in the wilderness. He might well have accepted some of the acclaim which men offered him. He might have honestly said, “*Yes, I am the great Prophet of whom the Bible speaks.*” But, no, he wanted to be and remain only a voice.

A voice is of little value in itself. It acquires value only through the message which it proclaims. John was satisfied to be the voice in the wilderness. But

while he was only a voice, the message which the voice proclaimed was of the greatest importance to him and to the world.

2. The Voice Of One Crying In The Wilderness But A Voice With An Important Message

The voice in the wilderness cried, *“Make straight the way of the Lord.”* This was a message of utmost importance. The Lord’s way had become very, very crooked. God’s people had become a sinful nation, full of hypocrisy.

Outwardly they worshiped the Lord, spoke their prayers, offered their sacrifices, observed the Sabbaths and the special feast days. But John rightly called them a generation of vipers and warned them against the impending doom that would engulf them unless they brought forth fruits worthy of repentance.

It was a voice which cut many to the heart. Selfish people realised that their heart was not right with God. Notorious tax collectors confessed their sins and misdeeds and asked to be baptised. Rude soldiers came penitently seeking forgiveness.

This wilderness voice is of the greatest importance still. Jesus cannot enter into our hearts unless they are first crushed by the hammer blows of God’s holy Law.

Christmas, with its gladsome message, *“Unto you is born a Savior,”* cannot stir the hearts even of many church members because they, like the Jews of old, have the wrong conception of their relation to God. They think they are the favourites of the Lord because of their church and Communion attendance, their Bible knowledge, their prayers, their contributions, and similar outward acts.

We all need John the Baptist to arouse us with his stirring call, *“Prepare the way of the Lord in true repentance.”* Oh, that he might remove the blindness from our eyes and drive us to serious heart searching!

Pointing People To Christ

But that is not enough. John must also give us the right understanding of Jesus and His mission. When the delegation asked John, *“Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”* John answered, saying, *“I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do*

not know. ²⁷ ***“It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”***

In other words John is saying to them, I perform the mere outward service of baptising with water, but the inner effect comes from another. My hand is able to apply water, but it cannot produce sorrow for sins and faith in the forgiveness of sins nor a new life in the Holy Spirit. One who is mightier than I must do that. He will baptise with the Spirit and fire.

What John here says of his baptising still holds true today. Every minister who baptises, or for that matter, preaches, pronounces absolution, administers Holy Communion, is only the tool in the hand of God, only the voice proclaiming the message. The power to do what the Word declares comes from above.

Without the Mightier One, preaching is empty, and all sacred acts are meaningless. But Christ speaks through the Word and the Sacraments, and God’s Spirit enters the heart as a purifying fire which penetrates the soul.

For that reason John wanted the delegation to know Jesus as he himself had learned to know Him. He knew Him to be ***“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”*** and therefore also his own sins. Thus it was only natural that when Jesus came to be baptised, John hesitated, saying, ***“I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?”***

John truly knew Jesus. No wonder that he was always ready to witness of Him before others. Before the delegation he spoke as plainly as that is possible, ***coming after me, is preferred before me.*** This sounds mysterious, but it is a clear witness to the deity of Jesus. In point of time, Jesus was after John. He was born six months after him. But in reality He was “from everlasting.”

John the Evangelist speaks of Him as the eternal Word, who was from the beginning and who was God. The Lord added His own witness to this when He said, ***“Before Abraham was, I AM.”***⁶

Right Understanding Of Person Of Christ Indispensable

Such an understanding of the Person of Jesus is absolutely necessary for a worthy Christmas preparation and Christmas celebration. He who sees in Christmas only the birthday of a man may at best honour and admire Jesus for

His gracious words and for His glorious deeds, but he cannot bow before Him in worshipful adoration.

That is the reason why so many people miss the real joy and blessing of this festive season. Oh, that John the Baptist might stand among us and lift our eyes to see Jesus as he saw Him!

In vivid recognition of the grandeur of the Lord, John closes his testimony with the words, *whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose*. In this way speaks the man whom crowds came to hear and multitudes honoured. He considered himself unworthy to perform even the lowly service of a slave for Jesus.

Yet Jesus, whom even the holy angels adore, deigns to come to this sinful world, He seeks an entrance into our hearts and homes, He will come to us with His heavenly blessings. Let us prepare the way for Him in true repentance and faith.

We conclude with the words of the hymnist,⁷

*Hark, the herald's voice is crying
In the desert far and near,
Calling all men to repentance
Since the kingdom now is here.
O that warning cry obey:
For the Lord prepare the way;
Let the valleys rise to meet Him,
And the hills bow down to greet Him. Amen*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Malachi 3:1

² Luke 1:76-77

³ Matthew 11:14-15

⁴ Revelation 3:17

⁵ Rom. 7:18

⁶ John 8:58

⁷ Hymn 12 v 3