

## The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymns: 60, 61, 58, 56

The INTROIT

(Is.45:8; Ps.19:1)

*P: Drop down, ye heavens, from above:*

**C: and let the skies pour down righteousness.**

*P: Let the earth open:*

**C: and bring forth salvation.**

*P: The heavens declare the glory of God:*

**C: and the firmament showeth His handiwork.**

*(The "Gloria in Excelsis" is omitted during the Penitential Season of Advent)*

The COLLECT

Stir up O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power, and come and help us with Thy great might, succor us that by the help of Thy grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The FIRST LESSON

Isaiah 40:1-8 (KJV)

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

The GRADUAL

(Ps. 145:18,21; 40:17b)

*P: The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him:*

**C: to all that call upon Him in truth.**

*P: My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord:*

**C: and let all flesh bless His holy name. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!**

*P: Thou art my Help and my Deliverer:*

**C: make no tarrying, O my God. Hallelujah!**

## The EPISTLE

Philippians 4:4-7 (KJV)

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The SENTENCE for the Season

(Psalm 25:6)

*P: Hallelujah! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies:*

**C: for they have been ever of old. Hallelujah!**

## The HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 1:19-28 (KJV)

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.

Then said they 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 the prophet Esaias.

And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?

John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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## John 1:19-28 — “Who Art Thou?”

### INTRODUCTION

I. WHO ART THOU?

II. I AM THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

III. WHY BAPTIZEST THOU THEN

### CONCLUSION

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John 1:19-28 — “Who Art Thou?”

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

The sermon text is the Gospel reading appointed for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, John 1:19-28:

**And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.**

**And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.**

**Then said they 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 the prophet Esaias.**

**And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?**

**John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.**

**These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.**

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

### INTRODUCTION

**“And this is the record of John.”** Is this the record or testimony concerning John, or is this the record or testimony given by John? The statement as it stands written can be read and understood either way. That is, in fact, the intention and the point of today’s text. St. John the evangelist and apostle is recording the record of both John the Baptizer and of the witness that the Baptizer gave to those who came to him. The message cannot be separated from the messenger. Thus we are told, **“And this is the record of John.”**

#### I. WHO ART THOU?

**And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?**

**“Who are you?”** This is a very appropriate question. After all, the Baptizer is drawing many people to hear his message and to be baptized. People are coming to John to be catechized concerning the true faith. He is instructing people regarding the meaning of being true

Christians. He is calling everyone to repentance. His audience is almost entirely from those coming to worship in Jerusalem. Moreover, all the prophecies of the Holy Scriptures point to this period in time as the time when the long awaited Christ should appear, and so all who claim to be Christians are expecting Him.

The Jews were the people of God to whom the witness of the Messiah or Christ was given. They were chosen and set apart or sanctified by the LORD for this very purpose. Their existence as a people, the promise of the inheritance of the land, their temple, their very distinct worship practices and doctrine, all flowed from this one purpose. They were the people of salvation through whom the Christ would be given to the world.

The promised time has come. For thousands of years the people of Israel have been promised and have stood as living testimony to the world that salvation is of the tribe of Judah and the stem of Jesse. All the leaders of the temple have been preaching of the coming of the Christ. All the people were expecting His coming at this very time. And now John is in the wilderness drawing multitudes and preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Yes, John was known far and wide as the Baptizer. His message was that all should be baptized with repentance for the remission of their sins. He did not preach that people should decide to repent, but that they should receive the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

This message was very different from what the people had been hearing. Even though their religious leaders had been preaching the coming of the Christ, their message was one of one's own works of repentance. John came preaching the Christ who works repentance and forgiveness through Baptism.

No wonder the people were drawn to the Baptizer. They came with their questions regarding what is right and wrong and what they should do, and John instructed them to be turned from their sinful ways through the baptism of repentance for the remission of their sins. This is a truly amazingly different message than what most preachers of repentance have proclaimed. Most preachers of repentance make repentance something that a person must choose for oneself. But John preaches a repentance that is worked by God by means of water and the Word. John preaches a repentance that is worked through the Word of God connected to simple water. John preaches a changed heart, mind, and soul in connection with what God works through faith in Jesus, faith that is received through the preaching of the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

The Gospel that is recorded in connection with the Baptizer is the Gospel of what God does for us through means that are so simple and easy that nothing whatsoever is required of the one who receives His gift of grace through faith. Salvation as a gift from God apart from any decision or work of the individual is truly a very different message. No wonder the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John, **“Who are you?”**

## II. I AM THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

The priests and the Levites from Jerusalem asked John, **“Who are you?”**

**And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.  
And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.  
Then said they 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 the prophet Esaias.**

Isn't this interesting? Nowhere is it recorded that the multitudes ever asked John who he was. They knew who John was. He was the preacher of the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He was a voice in the wilderness preaching the promise of Christ crucified. The people did not need to ask who John was or by what authority he preached. They recognized the Truth when they heard it. But the religious leaders sent emissaries to ask John's identity. What they really were doing was presenting a challenge to his authenticity and his authority. If they had been listening to John's message, they would not have challenged him but would have done as the multitudes and would have bowed down and confessed their sins and been washed with the Word with the water and would have risen up from their baptism filled with the joy of having their sins taken from them. But instead, they challenged John.

This is why John first tells them who he is not. John confessed, **"I am not the Christ."** Now the significance of this confession may slip right past us if we do not stop to remember the challengers and their challenge. They were sent to John not to hear the Gospel, but to challenge the Gospel that he preached. Like the Jews of today, these challengers really saw themselves as the Christ. They were not really looking for the Christ of the Scriptures, but for the Christ within themselves. They imagined that they were the salvation of the world rather than merely preachers of that salvation. They imagined that salvation comes through a decision to repent and follow a certain code rather than salvation being God's decision from eternity, the decision to send the Word Incarnate to lift up the sin of the world in His body on the cross. Therefore, they challenged John and His "baptism of repentance."

It is the same today by those who preach faith that is a decision and repentance that is chosen by the individual. God sent John into the wilderness so that the people would not be distracted by the preaching of the Pharisees. God sent John into the wilderness for the same reason that God commanded Moses to wander in the wilderness for forty years with the rebels of the house of Israel. God used the wilderness of the far lands of Assyria and Syria and Babylon for the same purpose. By dragging His people into the wilderness God works a change of heart, mind, and soul in those who find themselves separated from the belief systems that they have constructed for themselves.

When people are cut off from what they have built up for themselves, when people are no longer able to cling to those things that they have idolized, when people are brought low in spirit so that they see that their own efforts at drawing near to God are without any power or hope, then they understand the repentance that God works. Then they see that God is the one who does the approaching. Then they see that Advent is the coming of God in the flesh and not the coming of the flesh to God. Then they see that faith is truly God's work, a miracle that defies understanding.

And so John confesses to his challengers that he is not the Christ and that he is not Elijah and that he is not the prophet, but is simply the voice of one crying in the wilderness, **"Make straight the way of the Lord."** This is as plain as it can be said, and yet they did not hear it or understand it, even as most Christians today do not hear it or understand it. John was saying that the witness is not about the preacher nor about the believer, but about Christ. The true witness is Jesus, who is the way of the LORD. In the body of Jesus, the office of Christ is fulfilled. In the body of Jesus God is reconciling the world unto Himself. The only flesh and blood that has the power to draw near unto God is the flesh and blood of Jesus.

### III. WHY BAPTIZEST THOU THEN

“**Make straight the way of the Lord**” is the witness that John gave. This is why John was sent as the Baptizer.

**And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?**

**John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.**

**These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.**

“**Why therefore do you baptize?**” John could have simply turned the question back to them and asked them, “**Why therefore do you baptize?**” After all, baptizing was a regular part of the life of the people Israel. Baptism was not a new practice among the Jews. It was commanded by God through Moses. But John does not bother with that, for he knew that this was not the issue. The issue was one of challenging his authority to baptize for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism had not been practiced rightly for a very long time. Baptism had been practiced as what must be done by individuals rather than as the means that the LORD had ordained for reentrance into the kingdom of God. Baptism was never about what a person does. Baptism has always been the means by which God made people to be accounted as clean and fit for entrance into His kingdom of priests, into his holy people. Various circumstances made people ceremonially unclean so that they had to remain outside the congregation. By means of Baptism, God provided the way to be clean of what they could not undo for themselves so that they could again be participants or communicants in the congregation.

This is what Isaiah means about making straight the way of the LORD. This is what is foretold concerning the preaching of John the Baptizer. He is one who stands crying out in the wilderness that Baptism is the means by which the Lord comes directly to people to make them fit again for His kingdom. John points out that his baptism is a baptizing with water. By means of water this miracle is worked by God, but not water alone, but water connected with the preaching of the Christ.

John said that his baptism was for the purpose of making straight the way of the LORD. Then he said, “**But there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me.**” A few verses later we hear the Baptizer declaring this one as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and not only with water. John baptized with the water connected with the Word, that is, Christ. John’s baptism was prior to the fulfillment of Christ’s Advent. But with the incarnation, now the Christ was present to add to the water not only the gift of His presence, but also the gift of the Spirit. Now the Old Testament was fulfilled and renewed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was filled up with the Advent of Jesus, who now fills Baptism with the Spirit of grace. Now there is no more waiting in the Church. Now Baptism is filled up so that the Old Testament eating and drinking are also filled up to be the New Testament in Christ’s blood. Now there are no more sacrifices by which the Church looks to the shedding of the blood of Christ. Now the blood of Christ has completed the reconciliation through redemption. Now Baptism gives the fullness of the indwelling of the Triune God. Now Baptism is into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. There is no more waiting. Christ has come. Christ has fulfilled all things. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. This is what John’s baptism prepared the people to receive.

## CONCLUSION

The way of the LORD is straight. God has provided the straight and narrow way through which all men must be saved. It is simple. It is not at all complicated. It is not hard, for it requires absolutely nothing of the one to be saved. Even faith is not required, for faith is provided through the means of the straight path. God has ordained the means by which every person may know for certain that salvation is received. John preached this way, the way through which repentance and faith are worked in a person by the Word of God. The Word of God has added also the gift of the Spirit, so that the person who has received the repentance of Baptism hears again and again that this remission of sins is a complete and free remission. No sins remain to be accounted for. Christ has taken the sin of the world. Through Baptism Christ comes to us and joins us to the life that He has purchased for us and the Holy Spirit is given to keep us in this new life in Christ. This Spirit of life continues to work His renewal in us so that we hunger and thirst for Jesus and His life in the Sacrament. He causes us to partake of God's Holy Communion through eating and drinking what is given with the bread and the wine within the true body of Christ. Truly the way of the LORD has been made straight and we may be certain that through His way He does come to us to bless us and keep us in His grace all the days of our lives and even forevermore. Therefore, when our own hearts challenge us and whenever anyone else challenges us with the question, "**Who are you?**" we turn to the straight way of the LORD and we know for ourselves and can openly proclaim the Lord's death for all. Who are we? We are the people who have been baptized into Christ Jesus to live in His Holy Communion of forgiveness and everlasting life. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.