

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Fourth Sunday in Advent (Rorate Coeli 2021)

Voices Crying in the Wilderness

Rev. Toby Byrd

“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.’” (John 1:23, ESV)

Last week we heard our Lord answer John the Baptist’s question if He was the One to come, saying to his disciples, ***“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matthew 11:4–5, ESV)*** Jesus told these men what they needed to hear; “Look at the signs, do they not tell you who I AM? Do they not tell you what I offer to men? Do they not tell you of the mercy of God towards His people?” The obvious answer is yes, they do. Jesus said this to those who followed John the Baptist, the one specifically elected by God to prepare the way of the Lord. He was, ***“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,”*** proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, preparing God’s people for the coming of God’s only begotten Son.

The apostle John tells us that the preaching and baptizing of John the Baptist, ***“took place in Bethany across the Jordan.” (John 1:28, ESV)*** Across the Jordan opens our thoughts to the Exodus scene, to the offspring of those who had wandered in the wilderness for forty years as they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. Thus, ***“across the Jordan,”*** places John the Baptist in the wilderness, on the opposite side of the River Jordan from the Promised Land. In the wilderness is also where our Lord received His Baptism opening the flood waters of that blessed Sacrament, making our Baptism’s synonymous with our leaving the wilderness of sin, and through the blessed waters of Baptism, crossing over into God’s Promised Land. Thus, we have been saved through Baptism from our wandering in the wilderness.

But how many today are still wandering in the wilderness, still subject to the lurking dangers of sin, death, and the devil. These poor souls are destined to the same fate as those who died in the wilderness unless they are brought to repentance and salvation through the proclamation of the Gospel, that proclamation to which John the Baptist committed his life. His was a *voice crying in the wilderness*, calling men to repentance and salvation. Today, though, we wonder just how many *voices are crying in the wilderness*. The more pointed question though, is, is your voice counted among them?

Living in the wilderness is living without Christ. Today, as in the past, there are countless numbers of people who do not know the Lord Jesus. Here we are merely a few days from Christmas, a day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ who came into this world to give His life as a ransom for the sins of men. We rejoice at the Incarnation of the Son of God. We rejoice because the promise God made in the Garden of Eden thousands of years before, is fulfilled. The seed of the woman has come into the world to save man from sin. We celebrate this joyous day, because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Salvation came to live among us as one of us. Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, comes to save mankind from sin. We all know the joy of receiving gifts at Christmas, but there is no gift greater or more beneficial to man than this gift of God’s only begotten Son. However, this gift is a mystery to many. God’s gift of salvation through His blessed Son is not known or understood by most of mankind.

It was no different in the days of John the Baptist. Yes, the people of God, the Hebrews knew of the prophecy of the Christ. They even asked John the Baptist, ***“Who are you?”*** and ***“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.””*** (John 1:19–21, *ESV*) So it was not like they didn’t know of the promise of God to send His people a Savior. But the problem was, they were looking for a different kind of savior. They were looking for a man who would reestablish the former glory of Israel. One who would defeat their enemies and set their nation on a path of greatness one again.

But John the Baptist was none of the saviors for which the people were looking, instead He was simply, ***“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”*** (John 1:23, *ESV*) He was one fulfilling his calling, preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by preaching the Gospel and baptizing men for repentance and salvation. When we look at the ministry and work of John the Baptist, we can see clearly there is no other way to prepare people for the coming of Christ than through Law and Gospel preaching and the proper administration of the Sacraments. Word and Sacrament ministry is the ministry that makes straight the way of the Lord, the ministry which truly prepares people for His coming. It is not gimmicks or cultural relevancy. It is not prosperity gospel or revolutionary gospel. It is not teaching that all paths lead to heaven, that Jesus Christ is not the only way to the Father. These are the teachings of men, teachings which abound throughout what is loosely called Christianity. No, to ***“make straight the way of the Lord,”*** is to proclaim the word of God in all its truth and purity and to administer the holy sacraments according to the Gospel. But all too often we lament the fact that proclaiming the Gospel in all its truth and purity, and distributing God’s holy sacraments, the Gospel in visible means, falls on deaf ears. But our proclamation puts us in good company. It’s puts us with John the Baptist and the apostles of Christ, and with all the saints who have gone before us proclaiming this *same* truth. Yes, we are *Voices Crying in the Wilderness* for a divine purpose. Like John the Baptist, our proclamation of the Gospel is accompanied by the Holy Spirit who opens the hearts of those who hear that they may be brought to faith through the working of the Holy Spirit, as He works through the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is our calling here at Grace Lutheran Church, to proclaim the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ and to offer and administer that Gospel through our Lord’s blessed Sacraments, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution. But it doesn’t stop here in the Nave of Grace. No, like John the Baptist, God calls on us to also be *voices crying in the wilderness*, in the wilderness of the world and especially in our community of Paris, Texas.

St. Paul tells us that, ***“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*** (Romans 10:17, *ESV*) To acknowledge Jesus as Lord and to believe in His resurrection is to have faith, it is to receive righteousness and salvation. St. Paul makes it clear, faith comes from hearing the Gospel, and he says this is, ***“the word of faith that we proclaim.”*** (Romans 10:8, *ESV*) Putting an exclamation mark on the truth that faith comes from hearing the word of Christ which alone brings righteousness and salvation.

But too many believe they can bring about righteousness and salvation by their own effort, but listen to what Christ tells them. He says, ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”*** (John 15:16, *ESV*) He also says, ***“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”*** (John 6:44, *ESV*) Thus, our Lord is very clear, to be a follower of His, we must be drawn to Him by God, and that drawing comes through hearing the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ Jesus. It comes from believing that He chose you through His suffering and death. If you had chosen Him, you would have a reason to boast, but you have no reason to boast because it was not your work, but His work and His merit, through which He chose you. This

truth, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus is that which God would have proclaimed by those who are the *voices crying in the wilderness*. That's you, that's me, that's the church fulfilling its obligation to be about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ, of being about the business of saving souls from the fire of hell.

Moreover, once you have been chosen by Christ, brought to conversion and faith, He tells you that by His calling He has, ***“appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”*** (John 15:16, *ESV*) Indeed, His calling brought you out of the wilderness and into His kingdom of grace, but His gracious and saving call is not just for your benefit, it is also for the benefit of others. God says through Isaiah, ***““You are my witnesses . . . and my servant whom I have chosen.”*** (Isaiah 43:10, *ESV*) At His ascension, Jesus said, ***“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*** (Acts 1:8, *ESV*) You are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, of His life, death, and resurrection for the salvation of the world. You are called to be *Voices Crying in the Wilderness*.

But you say, Pastor, the wilderness, the world, is an evil place filled with people who don't know Christ. That's the point! They don't know Christ. You do, and your calling is to tell others about Christ. Yes, there is danger in going into the wilderness, and it is precisely because of that danger that you are called to go. The danger does not lie there for you, but it consumes those whom you are called to serve, your lost and condemned neighbor. Christ said to us, ***“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you . . . If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”*** (John 15:18–20, *ESV*) So, in the face of this hatred, Christ calls you to be a *voice crying in the wilderness* that others may receive what you have received, righteousness and salvation.

Therefore, do not to be idle. Do not to simply sit back on your hands and watch others do the work of being *voices in the wilderness* calling others to faith. Get up and help. Bear fruit. Be active in your congregation's evangelism programs, reach out to those in the darkness of the wilderness that they may hear of Christ and the salvation He won for them on the Altar of the Cross. Be true servants of our Lord Jesus.

Look at what you have received and realize that you can make others aware of the great Gospel blessings Christ gave to you through the Church, telling them what joy it is to know you are a child of God, not by what you have done, but by what God did for you through His Son, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, tell them what joy you have in knowing what God continues to do for you through His Means of Grace: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution. Through those means He cleanses you, forgives you, and reassures you that you are a child of His, that you are made a follower of His Son Jesus, and promised eternal life. What a marvelous Christmas present that would be for your neighbor who does not know the gift of God in Christ Jesus.

What great blessings you have to offer those who live in darkness, who live in the shadow of death, living in the wilderness. Heed this Advent call, get up and get out, go, do the work of evangelism, the work of the Gospel, the work of bringing people to faith. Go, be a *voice crying in the wilderness* proclaiming God's divine gift of His Son, Jesus Christ to a world dying of sin. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.