

We thank You, O Lord, for the full and complete testimony of Your prophets concerning our Lord Jesus Christ and His salvation, a testimony for us to accept in full confidence and assurance. Amen. (Luther for the Busy Man, ed. P. D. Pahl, p. 33)

[Zechariah said to his son, John:] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

In Christ Jesus, the divine incarnate Word through whom we receive grace and truth, dear fellow-redeemed:

When it comes to spiritual matters, your brains fail you. So does mine. No matter how smart or wise you are – in secular matters, your brain on its own cannot comprehend the deep things of God. The Apostle Paul speaks bluntly of this to the Corinthians: “no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God/Now we have received/the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words ...”

Our sinful reason scoffs at the notion that we are given things freely by God, we learn early that no one makes a profit giving things away. There always seems to be a catch, when the word “free” is used. But God does give to us freely and unless His Spirit works this faith in us sinful skeptics, we treat God’s gift of salvation as mere trickery of a huckster. Trusting God’s salvation is not a matter of convincing with logical arguments, but rather it is powerfully declared to us and despite our sinful reason it creates saving faith. So as we consider how God used the last and greatest prophet to prepare hearts to receive the Lord’s Christ, let us ponder this: **Without the Voice of God, How Shall We Know His Truth?**

## I

God has used many mouthpieces over the past millennia. Prophets, Apostles, Angels have certainly all spoken the Word of the Lord to His people. But there have been others that were not that “normal”. His voice came through a burning bush, a sorcerer’s donkey and even the sorcerer

himself, a pagan emperor and an unbelieving High Priest. No matter the dubious source, God's voice spoke His truth effectually giving His people what they needed. Here we are today and His voice is still heard through those called to preach and teach, but also through all Christians who get to speak in their manifold vocations to their many neighbors.

John the Baptizer was set apart as one of those divine mouthpieces already at His conception and birth, which his father recognized, calling him the prophet of the Most High. Here is how Zechariah described the work of John: "you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

John, as most of those who serve as mouthpieces of God, was not a specially trained orator who could convince any and all doubters. He was one who simply and faithfully declared the truth of God trusting that the Spirit would do His work of enlightening and converting. Did you catch how this would work for him? John would prepare the way of the Lord by giving knowledge of salvation - but again not as a teacher, a philosopher, rather as one who would declare the forgiveness of sins. By the message of God's free gift in His Son, sinners are changed from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. The voice of God gives us exactly what it says, e.g., when God said in the beginning "Let there be light." there was light. When God says "you are forgiven" your sins ARE forgiven.

The sinful mind considering what God has supposedly freely done for us in His Son declares it to be worthless, when in truth it is priceless. For us who now believe through the Spirit's gracious working we marvel at the priceless gift of God's Son as the sacrifice through which we alone have complete forgiveness.

## II

It is not strange that those through whom the voice of our gracious God is heard will be mistaken for the Lord Himself. In our Gospel lesson John had to correct those who heard him, saying: "I am not the Christ." The Apostle Paul was at least twice declared to be a god, once in Lystra and again on Malta. The aged Apostle John had to be corrected by the angel who was revealing God's truth to him that he should not bow down and worship him since he was only an angel, a messenger sent by God.

No one speaks such gracious words of unconditional forgiveness, life and salvation except the one true God who loves the entire human race. The ears of the unregenerate sinner hears what is thought to be lies. But the Spirit of God pierces those uncircumcised ears and with the truth of God's love for us in His Son, we hear with faith the Truth, which alone sets us free.

By the end of this week we are going hear once again the account of the angels appearing to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. First the angel will declare: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Then in response to this blessed truth, a multitude of the heavenly host joins that angel and they all praise God by saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

It is no accident that after hearing every Sunday the absolution, the declaration that we are freely forgiven of all our sins in this holy One born of Mary, that we break forth singing various versions of this angelic Christmas hymn of great joy. Our response is no different than what we are told about the shepherds, after visiting the holy family in the Bethlehem we are told: "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

The voice of our gracious Lord is as busy and active among us as it has ever been. It is our natural response as the regenerate today to glorify and praise God for all we hear. But without that voice declaring us forgiven and justified, the truth would not abide within us and faith would die.

Sometimes Christians will grow tired of hearing this good news. They will hear their pastors warning them about neglecting the Word and Sacrament and they think the warning comes from an inflated view the pastor has for himself. *Is he concerned about my attendance because without it his ego is pained?* A faithful pastor does not take one of his flock wandering away as a personal attack, even if it is meant in that way, but he reaches out with the warning because without the voice of the Good Shepherd the truth may be lost and faith dies.

John, who would be the voice of God out in the wilderness, went to the school of the Spirit. Hearing and learning the Word of our Lord at his local synagogue, he personally grew strong in the faith knowing and

trusting in the Truth of God's great love for him and all people. By the Spirit he was led to repent daily of his many sins, but also daily trust in the word of forgiveness.

When all of Jerusalem would come to John at the Jordan river, he faithfully declared the Word of truth, giving to all who repented the free gifts of salvation in the sweet words of forgiveness and in the cleansing waters of holy baptism. This was the comfort God desired John to cry out to His people. His Word which stands forever bestows exactly what it declares - their warfare is over, their iniquity is pardoned. God is now reconciled to us through His Christ.

Rejoice my fellow redeemed. You have heard the blessed truth of God's great love for you in His Son. The power of that truth is at work in you as the Spirit brings Christ to you with all His blessings. Do not neglect to hold this voice of God sacred gladly hearing and learning it all your days. With the voice of God actively speaking to you, you know the truth and thus are saved, just as God desires for all sinners. God's truth dwells in you, not by force but by His tender voice giving you peace and joy forevermore. Amen.