

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist | St. John 21:19-24  
December 27, 2015 | Parkland Evangelical Lutheran Church

**In Nomine Iesu**

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Lord God, gracious Father, who in the fullness of time sent Your Son to become man, to assume human flesh like ours and become our Brother, we thank You for Your truth and Your fatherly goodness in giving us this Savior. By His birth, death, and resurrection, we are delivered from sin, death, Satan, and hell. We beseech You, keep us until the end in true knowledge of our Redeemer, that with the holy angels, we may rejoice at His nativity, and on the Last Day, when He comes again, we may behold Him, together with You and the Holy Spirit, in glory and majesty, world without end. Amen. (*Lutheran Book of Prayer*, 2005 ed., p. 122)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

[Jesus] said to [Peter], "Follow Me." / Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to Him and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray You?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" / Jesus said to him, "If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" / This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh who accomplished our salvation, dear fellow redeemed:

In a conversation I had with a Mormon man a couple years ago, he argued that the Christian Church had so polluted the truth of Scripture that a new prophet was needed to provide the truth. He believed that this prophet was Joseph Smith. In 1830, Smith claimed to receive a revelation from Jesus, which is published in what is called "The Doctrine and Covenants." One of the things Smith said in this "revelation" is that he was visited by Peter, James, and John, who ordained him and his friend as apostles and special witnesses of Jesus. The problem with Smith's writings is that they do not agree with the teachings of the Bible. Far from fixing the divisions in the Christian Church, Mormon teaching pulls people away from Christ and focuses them on the notions of sinful man.

The only way that unity in the Church can be established is by the Word of God. This is the Word that was recorded by the prophets in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament by those who heard the teachings of Jesus first-hand or who recorded them from the apostles. The entire text of the NT was written down only decades after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. What is recorded in the Bible is the truth. It is the source and norm of all that we believe, teach, and confess. We need no latter-day prophet. We have God's Word transmitted to us by faithful

men who were inspired to write what they did by God the Holy Spirit. Today as we commemorate the life and work of the Apostle John, we recognize that we would not know Jesus unless His chosen disciples testified about Him. We have been brought to faith by the Holy Spirit through their testimony. **We Follow Those Who Followed Jesus.**

## I

John grew up fishing on the Sea of Galilee with his father Zebedee and his brother James. It was a lucrative family business. When Jesus called James and John to follow Him, Mark tells us that they set aside the nets they were mending and “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants” (1:19-20). Why were they willing to walk away from so much? Some suggest that John was a follower of John the Baptizer before he followed Jesus, that he was the one with Andrew who heard the Baptizer say, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (Jn. 1:35-39). This would indicate that John was concerned about spiritual matters. Then years later, we learn that John had ready access to the temple courts when Jesus was put on trial (Jn. 18:15-16). It is likely that he was well-trained in the OT Scriptures and was looking for the coming Messiah.

After Jesus’ twelve disciples began to follow Him, He brought John along with Peter and James into His inner circle. These three were with Jesus when He raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead (Mk. 5:37). They saw His transfiguration on the top of the mountain (Mt. 17:1). And Jesus asked them to watch with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane while He prepared for His suffering and death (Mt. 26:37). John is mentioned last in these accounts, which likely indicates he was the youngest of the three.

John does not refer to himself by name in his Gospel. But five times he does make reference to “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” including in today’s text (13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20). John knew that he would not have been a disciple of Jesus had it not been for Jesus’ love and mercy toward him. When John wrote down his Gospel, he was probably an old man. He could look back at his youthful attitude and his misunderstandings of what Jesus came to do, and marvel at God’s abundant grace. After all, it was John with his brother James who thought it would be a good idea for God to rain fire upon a Samaritan city that did not show proper hospitality to Jesus (Lk. 9:51-56). These brothers also requested that they should sit in honor at Jesus’ right and left hands in His kingdom (Mt. 20:20-23). It is well-placed that Jesus called James and John “Boanerges,” which means “Sons of Thunder” (Mk. 3:17). They may not have been as impetuous as Peter, but they made some noise nonetheless.

John was a deeply-flawed and sinful man. Jesus did not choose His disciples because of how holy they were. He chose them by His love and equipped them to carry out His work. This should comfort us sinners who also follow after Jesus. We see that even those select twelve disciples who were trained in the Scriptures did not always have the right understanding. We see their struggles and their weaknesses. But they were the ones Jesus loved, just as He loved and forgave the prostitutes, tax collectors, and other outcasts.

The record of the disciples’ transgressions is one indication of the inspiration of the NT. Because when you think about it: if you and I wrote autobiographies, we would likely omit those chapters in our lives that were not too impressive. There are certainly a number of sins that we would not put on record. We would instead write about our accomplishments and the things that put us in the best light.

This in itself indicates a major problem that afflicts every one of us, the problem of pride. In our pride, we stubbornly draw lines in the sand and let it be known that we will not change who we are or accommodate another in Christian love. We insist on doing things our way, even if it isn't God's way. But then we gloss over that by saying that "God accepts me for who I am, and He wants me to be happy." When James and John requested the places of honor in Jesus' kingdom, He asked them, "*Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?*" They said to Him, "*We are able*" (Mt. 20:22). They had no understanding of the cup of suffering Jesus was about to drink, and they were not as strong as they thought. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, every last one of the disciples "*left Him and fled*" (Mt. 26:56).

## II

So dear friends, Jesus has also called you to follow Him, just as He called John and the other disciples. Are you ready to drink the cup He drank? Is your heart in the right place? Would you rather forsake all else, even your own family members, to follow Him? Even if our mouths speak confidently about this, our hearts have doubts. As Christians, sometimes we have boldly followed Christ, but we have also stumbled along the way. We have even hidden our faith in order to escape ridicule and persecution. We have considered not following Him at all.

But your salvation does not depend on how well you follow Jesus, any more than John's salvation depended on this. Along with him and the rest of the saints, you are "the disciple whom Jesus loves." He did drink the cup of suffering and death for you. His Father sent Him to drink it to the very bottom, so that you would be bought back from a pride-filled, wayward life and given His full and free forgiveness. You know and believe what He has done for you, because sinners like you were eye-witnesses of these things. John watched Jesus' crucifixion (Jn. 19:26-27). Three days later, he saw the empty tomb with folded grave clothes. "*He saw and believed*" (Jn. 20:8). Then on several occasions after this, He saw Jesus alive and watched Him ascend into heaven.

It might seem strange that we are talking about the Apostle John so soon after Christmas. But then again, John is the one who clearly outlined the divinity of Christ in his Gospel. In the very first verse, John wrote, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Then in verse fourteen, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" The Man Jesus was God's own Son, who came to be the world's Savior. He took on flesh for you. He was born in Bethlehem to save you. And as John makes so clear in his Gospel, Jesus continues to bring you His blessings of grace and forgiveness through His Word and Sacraments.

It is said that John wrote his Gospel to combat false teachings that had already cropped up in the church. A man named Cerinthus was teaching that Jesus was not God, and many were following him. The story is told by one of the early church fathers that John went to a bath house in Ephesus. But when he learned that Cerinthus was there, he cried out, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within!"

John faithfully proclaimed what he had heard from Jesus and what he had seen. His testimony is trustworthy because he did not write of his own accord; He was inspired to write by God. This was made clear in today's first lesson from Revelation 1, where John writes, "*The revelation*

*of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John.”* But couldn’t God have also given a revelation later in time, like to Muhammed or Joseph Smith? He certainly could have, but if He had done so, the writings of these men would not contradict the writings of the apostles, which they so often do. Therefore we adhere to the testimony of the Bible. **We Follow Those Who Followed Jesus.** Their faithful record of Jesus’ life and works is all we need for salvation.

If tradition is accurate, John is the only apostle who did not die a martyr’s death. He still suffered. He was perplexed by false teachers. He was afflicted by ungodly rulers. Legend has it that the Romans tried to kill John by throwing him in a pot of boiling oil. But he emerged unscathed, so he was instead exiled to the island of Patmos, later dying in Ephesus. But even in his suffering and his loneliness, he was comforted by the Word that he was blessed to testify, the Word that declared him and that now declares you to be the beloved children of God and heirs of His heavenly kingdom. *Amen.*

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto everlasting life. Amen.*

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