

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Dearly Beloved,

We are almost there. Four more days until Christmas Eve.

Preparations for your smaller gathering are probably well underway.

Your plans may be more intimate with fewer people to prepare for,

but the set up and clean up for all the traditional goodies that you still plan to make is the same,  
just a little less time to make and decorate.

May it be just as true, then, that you, with joy, make your preparations for your sacred celebration  
of our Lord's presence among us with the same concern.

Or if you are one who does not get into all the festive traditions,

may it be that you concern yourself all the more about your spiritual preparations,

as Jesus once more comes to us today in Word and Sacrament to dwell among us with His grace.

*We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

---

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 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."

So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 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."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands One you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. <sup>(ESV)</sup>

*This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.* (John 17:17)

---

John was quite the personality. His clothes mimicked Elijah, the great prophet of repentance long ago, camel hair and a leather belt.

He ate locust and wild honey and lived in the wilderness, eschewing the comforts of life.

His fiery preaching along the Jordan attracted the attention of the Jewish people passing by.

And soon it drew the attention of multitudes, who were now coming out to meet him,

people with burdened consciences, coming to confess their sins, repenting and being baptized.

Soldiers and tax collectors even sought him out for his message of preparation.

St. Luke 3:15 tells us, **the people were in expectation,**

**and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ.**

Sadly, the priests and spiritual leaders in John's day might also have been in expectation of the Christ, but their hopes and dreams were pinned to a worldly christ and savior.

They caught wind of John and his message as the people fawned over him.

But they weren't so concerned about his message really.

They were more concerned with his influence on the people... and they were envious.

They didn't want any competition for the people's attention or obedience.

And so they sent this delegation to him to find out about him; what he said about himself.

Notice that they were wondering the same thing that was on the hearts of the people,

“Are you the Christ?”, but not necessarily for the same reason.

You see, the people were in expectation, in hope, that he might be.

The priests and Levites, were in skepticism, sure that he wasn’t.

John gave them a clear answer, both about who he was not, and about who he was.

But they did not believe him.

We know this because they did not submit to baptism.

Again St. Luke reports, **but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by Him.** Luke 7:30

And we find out in John’s Gospel that Nicodemus, one such Jewish ruler,

didn’t believe at that point because Jesus chastised him for it, saying,

**Truly, truly, I say to you, we [that is, Jesus and John the Baptist] speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you [plural: the Jewish leadership] do not receive our testimony,**

even though Nicodemus has just confessed for himself and on behalf of his ranks,

**“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.”**

Even after 3 years of signs and wonders, during the week of Jesus’ passion, when they asked Him,

**“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”**

Jesus asked them a similar question, implying that the answers would be the same,

**The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?”**

They refused to answer Jesus’ question, reasoning among themselves,

**“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’** Matthew 21:23-26

**But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”**

Dear Fellow Redeemed, it is a dangerous thing to speak and act against your conscience

and against what you know to be the truth, especially as you prepare for the coming of Christ.

That is what these men were doing.

They heard the confessions of John and Jesus...

They saw the wonderful signs that Jesus performed...

but they didn’t want to believe either of them.

They were comfortable with their lives and beliefs as they were.

They weren’t concerned about Truth, the eternal and absolute reality of the Truth.

They were concerned about their worldly well-being, the power and prestige they thought they had.

But notice John’s message: **He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”...**

**“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.**

John knew who he wasn’t... and who he was.

He didn’t pretend to be anything more than what he was...

he would not in any way take on the title of “the Christ.”

Nor would he deny anything less than what God had said about him...

he was "the voice" preparing the hearts of the people to be in the presence of Jesus.  
And so John was a faithful confessor, one who said the same thing God had said.

Dear fellow Redeemed, to be truly prepared to be in Christ's presence is to be a good confessor,  
to be saying, and obviously believing, the same thing God has said, about you and about Himself.  
This is why, at the beginning of the Divine Service, we confess our sins before God.

You say the same thing about yourself as God has said about you, that you are  
*"by nature sinful and unclean, and that you have sinned against Him by thought, word and deed."*

This is not to gloss over the nitty-gritty sins that burden your conscience with a general confession,  
not to overlook your own thoughts of self-glorification and self-deception,  
but an opportunity to flesh them out in your mind as you lay yourself bare before God.

This is your opportunity to bring the many sins, those that cause you fear or keep you up at night,  
before the Lord, hiding nothing, so that full and complete forgiveness and comfort can be received,  
as you hear God's voice declare to you, "I forgive you all your sins."

This is also why, at the beginning of the Divine Service, we confess our Savior, Jesus Christ, before God.  
By this, you are saying (and learning to say more readily and freely) the same thing about God  
as He has said and revealed about Himself.

You are holding to the truth of Christ's righteous life and atoning death,  
and saying that you believe that He accomplished these FOR YOU.

This is why you pray: *"Therefore we flee for refuge to Your infinite mercy,  
seeking and imploring Your grace, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

And the beautiful thing that happens when you confess the truth about Christ  
is that you say nothing less about yourself than what God has said about you,  
for in confessing Christ, you testify to what God has declared you to be,

His own blood-bought, adopted child... and heir of His kingdom that is at hand.

And thus, you are prepared to be in His presence, as David confessed in Psalm 24<sup>[3-5]</sup>,

**Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place?**

**He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false  
and does not swear deceitfully.**

**He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.**

Because of their obstinance, John had to confess sad words to that delegation of religious leaders,  
**"Among you stands One you do not know."** Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, walked among them.

As we now enter the final week of Advent, in our preparations for the celebration of Christmas,  
Jesus Christ, the Word-Made-Flesh, has come and dwells among us.

By His grace, in Baptism, you have known Him and been adopted into His name,

He has washed your heart and soul to give you a clean conscience before your heavenly Father.

You are truly worthy and well prepared then, for His coming now... at Christmas...  
and on the final day.

