

# Sermons for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

## Martin Luther

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## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent; Philippians 4:4-7

### A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil of 1521.

1. The text, though short, is a suggestive and important lesson in Christian faith. It teaches how we should conduct ourselves toward God and our neighbor. It says:  
"Rejoice in the Lord always."

### ***Our Conduct Toward God—Rejoice in Him***

2. Joy is the natural fruit of faith. The apostle says elsewhere (Galatians 5:22-23): "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control." Until the heart believes in God, it is impossible for it to rejoice in him. When faith is lacking, man is filled with fear and gloom and is disposed to flee at the very mention, the mere thought, of God. Indeed, the unbelieving heart is filled with enmity and hatred against God. Conscious of its own guilt, it has no confidence in his gracious mercy; it knows God is an enemy to sin and will terribly punish the same.

3. Since there exist in the heart these two things—a consciousness of sin and a perception of God's chastisement the heart must ever be depressed, faint, even terrified. It must be continually apprehensive that God stands behind ready to chastise. Solomon says (Proverbs 28:1), "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." And Deuteronomy 28:65-66 reads, "Jehovah will give thee there a trembling heart .... and thy life shall hang in doubt." One may as well try to persuade water to burn as to talk to such a heart of joy in God. All words will be without effect, for the sinner feels upon his conscience the pressure of God's hand. The prophet's injunction (Psalm 32:11) likewise is: "Be glad in Jehovah, and rejoice, ye righteous; and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart." It must be the just and the righteous who are to rejoice in the Lord. This text, therefore, is written, not for the sinner, but for the saint. First we must tell sinners how they can be liberated from their sins and perceive a merciful God. When they have been released from the power of an evil conscience, joy will result naturally.

4. But how shall we be liberated from an accusing conscience and receive the assurance of God's mercy? The question has been sufficiently answered in the preceding postils, and will be again frequently satisfied later on. He who would have a quiet conscience, and would be sensitive of God's mercy, must not, like the apostates, depend on works, still further doing violence to the heart and increasing its hatred of God. He must place no hope whatever in works; must apprehend God in Christ, comprehend the Gospel and believe its promises.

5. But what does the Gospel promise other than that Christ is given for us; that he bears our sins; that he is our Bishop, Mediator, and Advocate before God, and that thus only through him and his work is God reconciled, are our sins forgiven and our consciences set free and made glad? When this sort of faith in the Gospel really exists in the heart, God is recognized as favorable and pleasing. The heart confidently feels his favor and grace, and only these. It fears not God's chastisement. It is secure and in good spirit because God has conferred upon it, through Christ, superabundant goodness and grace. Essentially, the fruits of such a faith are love, peace, joy, and songs of thanksgiving and praise. It will enjoy unalloyed and sincere pleasure in God as its supremely beloved and gracious Father, a Father whose attitude toward itself has been wholly paternal, and who, without any merit on its part, has richly poured out upon that heart his goodness.

6. Such is the rejoicing, mark you, of which Paul here speaks—a rejoicing where is no sin, no fear of death or hell, but rather a glad and all-powerful confidence in God and his kindness. Hence the expression, "Rejoice in the Lord"; not rejoice in silver or gold, not in eating or drinking, not in pleasure or mechanical chanting, not in strength or health, not in skill or wisdom, not in power or honor, not in friendship or favor, nay, not in good works or holiness even. For these are deceptive joys, false joys, which never stir the depths of the heart. They are never even felt. When they are present we may well say the individual rejoices superficially, and without a heart experience.

To rejoice in the Lord—to trust, confide, glory and have pride in the Lord as in a gracious Father—this is a joy which rejects all else but the Lord, including that self-righteousness whereof Jeremiah speaks (Chapter 9:23-24): "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he hath understanding, and knoweth me." Again, Paul enjoins (2 Corinthians 10:17), "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

7. The apostle further commands in our text to rejoice "always." Thus he rebukes those who rejoice in God—who praise and thank him—only a portion of the time. These rejoice when it is well with them; when not, rejoicing ceases. Concerning them Psalm 4:8 teaches, they will praise God when he favors them. David does not so. He declares (Psalm 34:1): "I will bless Jehovah at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth." And David has good reason to do so, for who will harm or distress one favored of God? Sin harms him not; nor death nor hell. David sings (Psalm 23:4): "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." And Paul queries (Romans 8:35): "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" And then he goes on (verses 38-39): "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Again I will say, Rejoice."

8. The apostle emphasizes his admonition by repeating it. It is essential that we rejoice. Paul, recognizing that we live in the midst of sin and evil, both which things depress, would fortify us with cheer.

Thus rejoicing, even if we should sometimes fall into sin, our joy in God will exceed our sorrow in sin. The natural accompaniment of sin truly is fear and a burdened conscience, and we cannot always escape sin. Therefore we should let joy have rule, let Christ be greater than our sins. John says (1 John 2:1-2): "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins." Again (1 John 3:20): "Because if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."

### ***Our Conduct to Man—Forbearance***

"Let your forbearance [moderation] be known unto all men."

9. Having instructed the Corinthians concerning their conduct toward God—their duty to serve him with joyful hearts—Paul proceeds briefly to teach them how to conduct themselves before men, saying, "Let your moderation be known unto all men." In other words: Rejoice always before God, but before men be forbearing. Direct your life so as to do and suffer everything not contrary to the commandments of God, that you may make yourselves universally agreeable. Not only refrain from offending any, but put the best possible construction upon the conduct of others. Aim to be clearly recognized as men indifferent to circumstances, as content whether you be hit or missed, and holding to no privilege at all liable to bring you into conflict or produce discord. With the rich be rich; with the poor, poor. Rejoice with the joyful, weep with the mourning. Finally, be all things to all men, compelling them to confess you always agreeable, uniformly pleasant to mankind and on a level with everyone.

10. Such is the meaning of the little word here employed by the apostle—"epiikia," equity, clemency, accommodation—and which we cannot better render than by "moderation" or "forbearance." It is the virtue of adapting or accommodating oneself to another; of endorsing that other; of making all equal; of presenting a like attitude toward all men; not setting oneself up as a model and pattern; not desiring mankind to do homage to one, to conform to one's position. Justice may be classified as severe and mild. Too severe justice is often mitigated, and that is the equity, the moderation and clemency of the law. The Latin translator has rendered our word "modestiam," "moderation." This word would properly convey the thought were it not generally understood in its relation to eating, drinking and dressing. Here the intent is to indicate that moderation of life which adjusts and adapts self to the abilities and circumstances of others, yielding, commending, following, mitigating, doing, allowing, forbearing, according as one recognizes what the capacity and condition of a neighbor demands, even to the disparagement of one's own honor and life, and the detriment of his possessions.

11. For the sake of a better understanding, let us illustrate: Paul says (1 Corinthians 9:19-22): "For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law ... I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." That is, Paul ate and drank with the Jews according to the law, and generally conducted himself in harmony with its requirements; though he was not obliged so to do. He also ate and drank with the gentiles regardless of the law, and conducted himself without respect to its requirements and as the custom of the gentiles. For only faith and love are requisite. All else man is free to omit or to observe. Therefore, for the sake of one, all laws may be observed; for another, omitted. Observance must be adapted to the individual case.

Now, suppose some blind, capricious individual intrudes, demanding as necessary the omission of this thing and the observance of that, as did certain Jews, and insisting that all men follow him and he none—this would be to destroy equality; indeed, even to exterminate Christian liberty and faith. Like Paul, in the effort to maintain liberty and truth, everyone should refuse to yield to any such demand.

12. To illustrate further: Christ suffered his disciples to break the Sabbath—and himself frequently broke it—where necessary (Matthew 1:2 and Mark 2); but where necessity did not require otherwise, he observed the day. He assigned as reason for his conduct, "The Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath." Mark 2:28. That is, the law of the Sabbath permits freedom; for the sake of extending love and service to one, it may be broken; and to another, it may be observed.

13. Because of the Jews, Luke says, Paul circumcised Timothy. But he would not permit Titus to be circumcised for the very reason that false brethren insisted upon it and were unwilling to concede it a matter of choice. Paul claimed authority both to observe circumcision and not to observe it, according as would best contribute to the benefit of others. He deemed neither one course nor the other necessary. He did not believe in circumcision for the sake of the work itself—as a thing which must be performed.

14. But to make the application to ourselves: When the Pope commands us to confess, to receive the sacrament, to fast, to eat fish, or to perform any bidding of his, and insists that we must do these things because the Church requires it of us, we should calmly trample upon his injunctions, doing what is directly opposed, simply to defy him and maintain liberty. But when he does not insist upon these things, we should honor his desire by observing with observers and omitting with those who omit, presenting Christ's testimony, "The Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath," and declaring him much more Lord of human laws. To exercise our liberty in the observance of these commands, works no harm to faith nor to the Gospel; but to observe them by a forced act of obedience, destroys faith and the Gospel.

15. The same rule applies to all external institutions and ordinances, as monastic vows and rules. They are in themselves but a matter of choice and are not opposed to faith or love. We should maintain the privilege of observing them in love and liberty, for the sake of our associates—to preserve harmony with them. But when it is insisted that certain ordinances must be honored, that their observance is an act of obedience essential to salvation, we should forsake cloisters, tonsures, caps, vows and rules, and even take the opposite course, by way of testifying that only faith and love are the Christian essentials and it is our privilege to observe or omit all other things, being controlled by love and our associations. To conform to laws in a spirit of love and liberty works no harm, but to conform through necessity and forced obedience is to be condemned. Let this rule apply to ceremonials, hymns, prayers and all other Cathedral ordinances, so long as they are observed as a matter of love and liberty alone. Only for the service and for the enjoyment of the assembled company are they to be observed, and that when they are works not in themselves evil. When urged as inherently essential, we are to refrain; we must oppose them in order to maintain the liberty of faith.

16. Herein you see the diabolical character of the papal institutions, cloisters, in fact all popedom. For they simply make a matter of liberty and love one of necessity and forced obedience, whereby the Gospel, faith included, is exterminated, not to mention the consequent wretchedness of the common people who submit to obey for the sake of their appetites. For how many now attend the choral ceremonies and pray specified hours for God's sake? A general destruction of cloisters and other institutions would be the best reformation in this respect. They are of no benefit to Christianity and might easily be dispensed with. Before liberty could be established in one such institution, a hundred thousand souls might be lost in the others. When a thing is not beneficial and serves no purpose, but does unspeakable injury, and is beyond remedy, it is much better to utterly exterminate it.

17. But again, when civil government enjoins laws and demands tribute, we should freely serve, even though we are constrained. In this case our liberty and faith are not endangered. For civil government does not claim that observance of its laws is essential to salvation, but essential to civil dominion and protection. In submitting to it, then, conscience maintains its liberty, and faith is not impaired. To whatever does not do violence to our faith, and benefits others, we should fully conform. But when it is insisted that observance of any material laws is essential to salvation, our course of action should be the same as that already suggested relative to the laws of the Pope and the cloisters.

18. Now, the illustrations given serve as examples to follow in every instance. As Paul here teaches, let one put himself on an equality with all men, being not content to consider simply his own claims and rights, but the wishes and well-being of others. Paul has here in a single word set aside all rights. If your neighbor's condition really demands that you yield a certain personal right or privilege, and you insist upon that privilege, you act at variance with the principle of love and equality and are indeed blameworthy. For in yielding you sustain no injury to your faith, and your neighbor is profited. You would desire him to do thus unto you—a principle of natural law.

Indeed, we further add, in the event of one working you harm or injury, you are to put the best construction upon his act, excusing it in the spirit of that holy martyr who, when all his possessions were taken from him, said, "Truly, they can never take Christ from me." Say you likewise: "His act injures not my faith; why not excuse him? why not submit, and accommodate myself to him?"

19. I cannot better illustrate than by citing the conduct of two good friends, whose manner toward each other may serve as an example for us in our conduct toward all men. How did they act? Each did what pleased his fellow. Each yielded, submitted, suffered, wrought and accepted, just in accordance with his conception of what might profit or please the other, and all voluntarily, without constraint. Each adapted and accommodated himself to his friend, never from any selfish motive offering restraint. If one infringed upon the other's property rights, he was kindly excused. In short, in their case was neither law, demand, restraint nor fear; naught but perfect freedom and good will. Yet all things moved in a harmony the hundredth part of which could not be secured by any laws or restraints.

20. The headstrong and the unyielding, they who excuse none but are determined to control all things by their own wisdom, lead the whole world into error. They are the cause of all the wars and calamities known on earth. Yet they claim justice as their sole motive. Well has it been said by a certain heathen: "Summum jus, summa injustitia"—the most extreme justice is the greatest injustice. Ecclesiastes 7:16 also warns: "Be not righteous overmuch; neither make thyself overwise." As the most extreme justice is the greatest injustice, so the most extreme wisdom is the greatest folly. The old adage is, "When the wise act the fool, they are grossly foolish." Were God always to execute extreme justice, we could not live a moment. Paul commends gentleness in Christ (2 Corinthians 10:1), saying, "I ... entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." So we are to moderate our attitude, our demands, our wisdom and wit, adapting ourselves to the circumstances of others in all respects.

21. Observe the beautiful aptness of the words, "Let your forbearance be known unto all men." You may ask:

"How can one become known to all men? And must we boast of our forbearance, proclaiming it to everyone?" God forbid the latter. Paul does not say, boast of and proclaim your forbearance. He says, let it be experimentally known by all men. That is, exercise forbearance in your deeds before men; not think or speak of it, but show it in your conduct. Thus men generally must see and grasp it—must have experience of it. Then no one can do otherwise than admit you are forbearing. Actual experience will defeat every desire to speak of you in any other way. The mouth of the fault-finder will be stopped by

the fact that all men know your forbearance. Christ says (Matthew 5:16): "Even so let your light so shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." And Peter (1 Peter 2:12): "Having your behavior seemly among the Gentiles; that, wherein they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." It lies not in our power to make our moderation acceptable to all men, but it is enough for us to give everyone opportunity to perceive it in our lives.

22. By the phrase "all men" we are not to understand all individuals on earth, but every sort of person—friends and foes, great and humble, lords and servants, rich and poor, native and alien, relatives and strangers. Some there are whose manner toward strangers is most cordial and acquiescent, but toward their own household, their domestics, with whom they are familiar, they manifest only rigor and austerity. How many there are who excuse the harshness of the great and the rich, who wrest to the most favorable construction what they do and say, but with servants, with the poor and the inferior, are severe and unfeeling, placing, the most unfavorable construction upon their every word and act. Again, men are affectionate toward children, parents, friends and relatives, always judging them with the utmost lenience. Indeed, how often friend flatters friend, until the practice becomes a public vice as one imitates and regards admirable all acts of the other. But with foes and adversaries men adopt the opposite course. In them they can find no good, no reason for toleration or favorable construction; rather, they censure according to appearances.

23. In denunciation of such unequal and partial forbearance, Paul here speaks. He would have a Christian's forbearance perfect and complete, manifested toward one as toward another, whether friend or foe. He would that the Christian bear with and excuse everyone, regardless of person or merit. Forbearance is essentially good, inherently kind; just as gold remains gold whether possessed by a godly or an ungodly individual. The silver did not become ashes when Judas the traitor received it. Similarly, all gifts of God are real and remain the same in everyone's possession. That forbearance which is a fruit of the Spirit retains its characteristic kindness whether directed toward friend or enemy, toward rich or poor.

24. But frail, deceptive human nature assumes that gold, though remaining gold in St. Peter's hand, becomes ashes in the hand of Judas. The forbearance of human nature, of natural reason, is kind, not to all men, but to the rich and the great, to strangers and friends. Hence it is false, empty, deceptive; mere dissimulation and treachery before God. Note how impossible it is for human nature to exercise complete spiritual forbearance, and how few individuals are conscious of the imperfections of that supposedly beautiful, transcendent forbearance they manifest toward some persons while they show the reverse to other individuals, presuming they thus act rightly. But such is the teaching of our mean, filthy human nature with that same beautiful reason, which ever decides and proceeds contrary to the Spirit and the things of the Spirit. As Paul says in Romans 8:5, "They that are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh."

25. In these few words Paul comprehends the Christian's entire conduct toward his neighbor. The forbearing individual treats everyone rightly, in word and act; treats him as he ought, physically and spiritually, bearing with his evils and imperfections. Such conduct may be defined as simply love, peace, patience, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, in fact, everything included in the fruits of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22.

## **Objections Answered**

26. But you will say: "Yes, but in that case who would be left in the enjoyment of a morsel of bread because of the wicked people ready to abuse equality and take our all, not permitting us to live on the earth even?" Note Paul's beautiful answer to your question, in the conclusion of this epistle lesson. He says, first,

"The Lord is at hand."

27. Were there no God, you might well thus fear the wicked. But not only is there a God; he "is at hand." He will neither forget nor forsake you. Only be forbearing to all men, and let him care for you; leave it to him how he is to support and protect you. Has he given you Christ the eternal treasure? how then shall he not give you the necessities of this life? With him is much more than anyone can take from you. Then, too, you possess in Christ more than is represented in all this world's goods. On this subject the psalmist says (Psalm 55:22): "Cast thy burden upon Jehovah, and he will sustain thee"; and Peter (1 Peter 5:7), "Casting all your anxiety upon him, because he careth for you." And Christ in the sixth chapter of Matthew points us to the lilies of the field and the fowls of the air. The thought of these passages is the same as that of "The Lord is at hand." Now follows,

"In nothing be anxious."

28. Take no thought for yourselves. Let God care for you. He whom you now acknowledge is able to provide for you. It is the heathen, unknowing he has a God, who takes thought for himself. Christ says (Matthew 6:31-32): "Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink; or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things." Then, let the whole world grasp, and deal unrighteously, you shall have enough. You shall not die of hunger or cold unless someone shall have deprived you of the God who cares for you. But who shall take him from you? How can you lose him except you yourself let him go? We have no reason to take thought for ourselves when we have a Father and Protector who holds in his hand all things, even them who, with all their possessions, would rob or injure us. Our duty is to rejoice ever in God and be forbearing toward all men, as becomes those assured of ample provision for body and soul; especially in that we have a gracious God. They without him may well be concerned about themselves. It should be our anxiety not to be anxious, to rejoice in God alone and to be kind to men. On this topic the psalmist says (Psalm 37:25): "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." And again (Psalm 40:17), "The Lord thinketh upon me."

## **Prayer**

"But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."

29. Here Paul teaches us to cast our care upon God. The meaning is: Take no thought for yourselves. Should anything transpire to give you care or anxiety—and such will be the case, for many trials will befall you on earth—make no effort to escape it, be it what it may. Have no care or anxiety. Turn to God with prayer, with supplication, entreating him to accomplish for you all you would seek to effect by care. And do so in thankfulness that you have a God solicitous for you and to whom you may freely come with all your anxieties. Who does not so when misfortune befalls, but endeavors to measure it by his reason and to overrule it by his counsel, and falls into anxiety—this man plunges himself into deep

wretchedness, loses his joy and peace in God, and all to accomplish nothing. He but digs in the sand, sinking himself ever deeper, and effects no good. Of this fact we daily have testimony in our own experience and in that of others.

30. It may be necessary to add this, however: Let no one conclude he will be utterly careless and rest upon God, making no effort, no exertion, not even resorting to prayer. Whoso adopts this course must soon fail and fall into anxiety. We must ever strive. Many care-engendering things befall us for the very purpose of driving us to prayer. Not undesignedly does the apostle contrast the two injunctions, "In nothing be anxious," and, In all things flee to God. "Nothing" and "all" are contrasting terms. Paul thus makes plain that many things transpire which tend to create in us anxiety, but we must not let them make us overanxious; we must commit ourselves to God and implore his aid for our needs.

31. Now, let us examine Paul's words and learn how to frame our prayers and what attitude to assume. He makes a fourfold division of prayer: prayer, supplication, thanksgiving and petition. By "prayer" we understand simply formal words or expressions—as, for instance, the Lord's Prayer and the psalms—which sometimes express more than our request. In "supplication" we strengthen prayer and make it effective by a certain form of persuasion; for instance, we may entreat one to grant a request for the sake of a father, or of something dearly loved or highly prized. We entreat God by his Son, his saints, his promises, his name. Thus Solomon says (Psalm 132:1), "Jehovah, remember for David all his affliction." And Paul urges (Romans 12:1), "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God"; and again (2 Corinthians 10:1), "I ... entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." "Petitioning" is stating what we have at heart, naming the desire we express in prayer and supplication. In the Lord's Prayer are seven petitions, beside prayer proper. Christ says (Matthew 7:7-8): "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." In "thanksgiving" we recount blessings received and thus strengthen our confidence and enable ourselves to wait trustingly for what we pray.

32. Prayer is made vigorous by petitioning; urgent by supplication; by thanksgiving, pleasing and acceptable. Strength and acceptability combine to prevail and secure the petition. This, we see, is the manner of prayer practiced by the Church; and the holy fathers in the Old Testament always offered supplication and thanks in their prayers. The Lord's Prayer opens with praise and thanksgiving and the acknowledgment of God as a Father; it earnestly presses toward him through filial love and a recognition of fatherly tenderness. For supplication, this prayer is unequalled. Hence it is the sublimest and the noblest prayer ever uttered.

33. These words of Paul beautifully spiritualize and explain the mystery of the golden censer whereof Moses has written much in the Old Testament, detailing how the priests should burn incense in the temple. We are all priests, and our prayers are the censer. The first is the golden vessel, which signifies the precious words of prayer; such as the language of the Lord's Prayer, the psalms, and like written prayers. Always in the Scriptures the words are represented by the vessel; for words are a medium for containing and conveying thought, just as the vessel serves to contain wine, water, coals or anything else. Similarly, the golden cup of Babylon mentioned in Revelation 17:4 typifies human doctrine; and the sacramental cup, containing Christ's blood, is the Gospel.

34. The live coals in the censer stand for thanksgiving, for enumerated benefits in prayer. That coals signify benefits Paul implies where, quoting Solomon's injunction in Proverbs 25:21-22, which the apostle cites (Romans 12:20): "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head." Burning coals of fire, the benefits are, and powerful to take captive and enkindle the heart. The Law forbade to take coals from any place but the altar; ac-

cordingly, we must not in prayer urge our own works and merits, as did the pharisee in the Gospel (Luke 18:11-12), but acknowledge the benefits in Christ. He is the altar upon whom we are offered. By this benefit we render thanks and pray. Paul says (Colossians 3:17), "Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." God cannot permit us to regard anything but our altar Christ. Thus he teaches, where it is recorded (Leviticus 10) that Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, were devoured by fire before the altar because they took coals for the censer from elsewhere than that place of sacred offering.

35. The petition whereby prayer is made complete is typified by the smoke ascending at the laying of the thyme—the incense—upon the coals. Paul's exhortation, "Let your requests be made known unto God," recognizes and explains the symbol of the smoke rising from the censer. His meaning is: "If you would offer a sweet savor of incense to God, express your petition in supplication and thanksgiving. This is the precious, sweet incense recognized by God, ascending as straight before him as a taper and a rod.' Such prayer penetrates heaven. Grateful recognition of God's benefits induces us to pray voluntarily and fervently, naturally and with delight; just as the coals of fire make strong the volume of smoke. If there be not first the coals to generate heat, if there be not gratitude for benefits to enkindle fervor, prayer will be sluggish; it will be cold and dull.

36. But what is meant by "making known" our prayers to God when he knows them even before we begin, in fact, comes to us first and induces us to pray? I answer, Paul uses this expression by way of teaching us how to really and truly pray—not to pray vainly or at a venture as do they who are indifferent whether God hears them or not, who are ever uncertain of being heard, yes, are inclined to think they will not be heard. That is not praying; it is not petitioning. It is tempting and mocking God. Should one entreat me for a penny and I knew he did not believe, did not have a thought, that I would give it him, I would not be disposed to hear him. I would conclude he was either mocking me or was not in earnest. How much less will God hear mere noise! True prayer is the "making known" of our desires to God. In other words, we must not doubt that God hears us; that our prayer reaches him; that our requests assuredly shall be granted. If we do not believe we are heard, that our prayer reaches God, undoubtedly it will not reach him. As we believe, so will it be.

The ascending smoke is but our faith when we believe our appeal reaches God and is heard. Paul's words hint at the frequent claims of the psalms: "My cry before him came into his ears." Psalm 18:6. "Let my prayer be set forth ... before thee." Psalm 1:41-2. Relative to this topic, Christ says, "All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." Matthew 21:22. See also Mark 11:24. And James counsels (Chapter 1:6-7): "But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting; for he that doubteth ... let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord."

37. Easily, then, we recognize the bawling in the cloisters and cathedrals all over the world as mere mockery, a tempting of God. Prayer of that sort is well enough made known to men, considering the constant loud outcry and bellowing of them who offer it. But to God it is unknown. It fails to reach him because the offerers do not believe, or at least are uncertain, that it will. As they believe, so is it. Time indeed it is for such mockery and tempting of God to be rejected and the mock-houses, as Amos calls them in the seventh chapter, to be exterminated. Oh, if we would but pray aright, what could we not accomplish! As it is, we pray much and obtain nothing; for our prayers never reach God. Woe to unbelief and distrust!

## ***The Peace of God***

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."

38. Note the beautiful logic and order of Paul's teaching. The Christian is first to rejoice in God through faith and then show forbearance or kindness, to men. Should he ask, "How can I?" Paul answers, "The Lord is at hand." "But how if I be persecuted and robbed?." Paul's reply is, "In nothing be anxious. Pray to God. Let him care." "But meanwhile I shall become weary and desolate." "Not so; the peace of God shall keep you." Let us now consider the last thought.

39. By the phrase, "the peace of God," we must understand, not that calm and satisfied peace wherein God himself dwells, but the peace and contentment he produces in our hearts. It is called the "peace of God" in the same sense that the message of God which we hear and believe and speak is styled "the Word of God." This peace is the gift of God, and is called the "peace of God" because, having it, we are at peace with him even if we are displeased with men.

40. This peace of God is beyond the power of mind and reason to comprehend. Understand, however, it is not beyond man's power to experience—to be sensible of. Peace with God must be felt in the heart and conscience. How else could our "hearts and minds" be preserved "through Christ Jesus"? To illustrate the difference between the peace of God and the peace comprehensible by reason: They who know nothing of fleeing to God in prayer, when overtaken by tribulation and adversity and when filled with care and anxiety proceed to seek that peace alone which reason apprehends and which reason can secure. But reason apprehends no peace apart from a removal of the evil. Such a peace does not transcend the comprehension of reason; it is compatible with reason. They who pray not, rage and strive under the guidance of reason until they obtain a certain peace by fraudulent or forcible removal of the evil. just as the wounded seeks to be healed. But they who rejoice in God, finding their peace in him, are contented. They calmly endure tribulation, not desiring what reason dictates as peace—removal of the evil. Standing firm, they await the inner strength wrought by faith. It is not theirs to inquire whether the evil will be short or long in duration, whether temporal or eternal; they give themselves no concern on this point, but ever leave it to God's regulation. They are not anxious to know when, how, where or by whom termination of the evil is to come. In return, God affords them grace and removes their evils, bestowing blessings beyond their expectations, or even desires.<sup>41</sup> This, mark you, is the peace of the cross, the peace of God, peace of conscience, Christian peace, which gives us even external calm, which makes us satisfied with all men and unwilling to disturb any. Reason cannot understand how there can be pleasure in crosses, and peace in disquietude; it cannot find these. Such peace is the work of God, and none can understand it until it has been experienced. Relative to this topic, it is said in the epistle for the second Sunday in Advent: "The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing." What the apostle there terms "peace in believing" he here calls "peace of God."

42. In this verse Paul implies that for him who rejoices in God and exercises forbearance in his life, the devil will raise up a cross calculated forcibly to turn his heart from that way. The Christian should therefore be well fortified, placing his peace beyond the devil's reach—in God. Let him not be anxious to rid himself of what the devil has forced upon him. Let him suffer Satan's wantonness until God's coming shall exterminate it. Thus will the Christian's heart, mind and affection be guarded and preserved in peace. His patience could not long endure did not his heart exist above its conditions, in a higher peace—were it not satisfied it has peace with God.

43. "Heart" and "mind" here must not be supposed to mean human will and understanding. We are to take Paul's explanation—heart and mind in Christ Jesus; in other words, the will and understanding res-

ultant in Christ, from Christ and under Christ. Faith and love are meant—faith and love in all their operations, in all their inclinations toward God and men. The reference is simply to a disposition to trust and love God sincerely, and a willingness of heart and mind to serve God and man to the utmost. The devil seeks to prevent this state by terror, by revealing death and by every sort of misfortune; and by setting up human devices to induce the heart to seek comfort and help in its own counsels and in man. Thus led astray, the heart falls from trust in God to a dependence upon itself.

44. Briefly, this text is a lesson in Christian living, in the attitude of the Christian toward God and man. It teaches us to let God be everything to us, and to treat all men alike, to conduct ourselves toward men as does God toward us, receiving from him and giving to them. It may be summed up in the words "faith" and "love."

# **Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent; John 1:19-28**

**A sermon by Martin Luther from his Church Postil, 1520's.**

## ***1. The Witness and Confession of John the Baptist***

1. With many words the Evangelist describes and magnifies the testimony of John. Although it would have been sufficient if he had written of him, "He confessed," he repeats it and says, "He confessed and denied not." This was surely done in order to extol the beautiful constancy of John in a sore trial, when he was tempted to a flagrant denial of the truth. And now consider the particular circumstances.

2. First, there are sent to him not servants or ordinary citizens, but priests and Levites from the highest and noblest class, who were Pharisees, that is to say, the leaders of the people. Surely a distinguished embassy for a common man, who might justly have felt proud of such an honor, for the favor of lords and princes is highly esteemed in this world.

3. Secondly, they sent to him not common people, but citizens of Jerusalem, to wit, the capital, the sanhedrin, and the leaders of the Jewish nation. So it was as if the entire people came and did honor to him. What a wind that was! and how he might have been inflated, had he possessed a vain and worldly heart!

4. Thirdly, they do not offer him a present, nor ordinary glory, but the highest glory of all, the kingdom and all authority, being ready to accept him as the Christ. Surely a mighty and sweet temptation! For, had he not perceived that they wished to regard him as the Christ, he would not have said, "I am not the Christ." And Luke 3:15-16, also writes that, when everybody thought he was the Christ, John spoke, "I am not he who you think I am, but I am being sent before him."

5. Fourthly, when he would not accept this honor they tried him with another, and were ready to take him for Elijah. For they had a prophecy in the last chapter of the prophet Malachi, where God says: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

6. Fifthly, seeing that he would not be Elijah, they go on tempting him and offer him the homage due to an ordinary prophet, for since Malachi they had not had a prophet. John, however, remains firm and unshaken, although tried by the offer of so much honor.

7. Sixthly and lastly, not knowing of any more honors, they left him to choose, as to who or what he wished to be regarded, for they greatly desired to do him homage. But John will have none of this honor, and gives only this for an answer, that he is a voice calling to them and to everybody. This they do not heed. - What all this means we shall hear later on. Let us now examine the text.

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

8. They sent to him, why did they not come themselves? John had come to preach repentance to the entire Jewish people. This preaching of John they did not heed; it is clear therefore, that they did not send to him with good and pure intentions, offering him such honor. Neither did they truly believe him to be the Christ, or Elijah, or a prophet; otherwise they would have come themselves to be baptized, as did the others. What then did they seek of him? Christ explains this, John 5:33-35, "Ye have sent unto John,

and he hath borne witness unto the truth. He was the lamp that burneth and shineth, and ye were willing to rejoice for a season in his light." From these words it is clear they looked for their own honor in John, desiring to make use of his light," his illustrious and famous name, in order to adorn themselves before the people. For if John had joined them and accepted their proffered honor, they also would have become great and glorious before all the people, as being worthy of the friendship and reverence of so holy and great a man. But would not hereby all their avarice, tyranny, and rascality have been confirmed and declared holy and worthy? Thus John, with all his holiness, would have become a sponsor for vice; and the coming of Christ would justly have been regarded with suspicion, as being opposed to the doings of the priests and tyrants, with whom John, this great and holy man, would have taken sides.

9. Thus we see what rascality they practice and how they tempt John to betray Christ and become a Judas Iscariot, in order that he might confirm their injustice and they might share his honor and popularity. What cunning fellows they are, thus to fish for John's honor! They offer him an apple for a kingdom, and would exchange counters for dollars. But he remained firm as a rock, as is shown by the statement:

"And he confessed, and denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ."

10. John's confession comprises two things: First, his confessing, and secondly, his not denying. His confessing is his declaration about Christ, when he says, "I am not the Christ." To this belongs also that he confesses to be neither Elijah nor a prophet. His not denying is declaration of what he really is, when he calls himself a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Thus his confession is free and open, declaring not only what he is, but also what he is not. For if some one declares what he is not, such a confession is still obscure and incomplete, since one cannot know what is really to be thought of him. But here John openly says, what is to be thought of him, and what not, thus giving the people a certain assurance in confessing that he is not the Christ, and not denying that he is the voice preparing his advent.

11. Yet someone might say, The Evangelist contradicts himself in calling it a confession when John declares himself not to be Christ, whereas this is rather a denial, for he denies that he is Christ. To say, "Nay" is to deny, and the Jews wish him to confess that he is Christ, which he denies; yet the Evangelist says that he confessed. And again, it is rather a confession when he says, "I am the voice in the wilderness." But the Evangelist 'considers this matter and describes it as it is before God, and not as the words sound and appear to men. For the Jews desired him to deny Christ, and not to confess what he really was. But since he confesses what he is and firmly insists upon what he is not, his act is before God a precious confession and not a denial.

"And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? and he saith, 'I am not:'"

12. The Jews, as said above, had the prophecy concerning Elijah, that he was to come before the day of the Lord, Malachi 4:5. It is therefore also among Christians a current belief that Elijah is to come before the last day. Some add Enoch, others St. John the Evangelist. Of this we shall have something to say.

13. In the first place, all depends upon whether the prophet Malachi speaks of the second coming of the Lord on the last day, or of his first coming into flesh and through the Gospel. If he speaks of the last day, then we have certainly yet to expect Elijah; for God cannot lie. The coming of Enoch and St. John, however, has no foundation in Scripture, and is therefore to be considered as a fable. If, on the other hand, the prophet speaks of Christ's coming in the flesh and through the Word, then assuredly Elijah is no more to be expected, but John is that same Elijah announced by Malachi.

14. I am of the opinion that Malachi spoke of no other Elijah than John, and that Elijah the Tishbite, who went tip to heaven with the chariot of fire, is no more to be expected.

To this opinion I am forced first and foremost by the words of the angel Gabriel, Luke 1:17, who says to John's father, Zacharias: "And he shall go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just." With these words the angel manifestly refers to the prophecy of Malachi, adducing even the words of the prophet, who also says that Elijah is to turn the hearts of fathers to children, - as cited above. Now then, if Malachi had meant another Elijah, the angel doubtless would not have applied these words to John.

15. In the second place, the Jews themselves of old understood Malachi to speak of Christ's coming into the flesh. Therefore they here ask John whether he is Elijah, who is to come before the Christ. But they erred in thinking of the original and bodily Elijah. For the purport of the text is indeed that Elijah is to come beforehand, but not that same Elijah. We do not read, Elijah the Tishbite is to come, as the Bible calls him in 1 Kings 17:1 and 2 Kings 1:3, 8, but merely Elijah, a prophet. This Gabriel, Luke 1:17, explains as meaning, "In the spirit and power of Elijah," saying, as it were, He will be a real Elijah. Just as we now say of one who has another's manner and carriage, He is a true X.; as I may say e.g., The Pope is a real Caiaphas; John was a real St. Paul. In the same manner does God through Malachi promise one who is to be a true Elijah, i.e. John the Baptist.

16. Yet would I not trust the interpretation of the Jews alone, were it not confirmed by Christ, Matthew 10:10 ff. When, on Mount Tabor, the disciples saw Elijah and Moses, they said to the Lord, "Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?" They meant to say, "You have already come; yet Elijah has not come first, but only now, after you: and was it not said that he was to come before you?" This interpretation was not rejected, but confirmed by Christ, who said, "Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you that Elijah is come already; and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed." Then the disciples understood, says St. Matthew, that he spoke of John the Baptist. St. Mark likewise says, 9:13, "But I say unto you that Elijah is come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they would, even as it is written of him."

17. Now there is no other prophecy concerning Elijah's coming but this one of Malachi, and Christ himself applies it to John. Thus it has no force if someone were to object, Christ says that Elijah is to come first and restore all things, for Christ interprets his own words by saying, "But I tell you that Elijah is come" etc. He means to say, It is right and true what you have heard about Elijah, that he is to come first and restore all things; thus it is written and thus it must come to pass. But they do not know of which Elijah this is said, for he is come already. With these words, therefore, Christ confirms the Scriptures and the interpretation concerning the coming Elijah, but he rejects the false interpretation concerning an Elijah other than John.

18. Most strongly, however, does Christ assert, Matthew 11:13 ff., that no other Elijah is coming. He says, "All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you will receive it, this is Elijah, that is to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Here it is made clear that but one Elijah was to come. Had there been another he would not have said, "John is Elijah who was to come," but he would have had to say, "John is one of the Elijahs," or simply, "He is Elijah." But by 'calling John that Elijah whom everybody expects, who, doubtless, was announced to come, he makes it sufficiently clear that the prophecy of Malachi is fulfilled in John, and that after this no other Elijah is to be expected.

19. We insist, therefore, that the Gospel, through which Christ has come into all the world, is the last message before the day of judgment; before this message and advent of Christ John came and prepared

the way. And although all the prophets and the law prophesy until John, it is not allowed to apply them, neglecting John, to another Elijah who is yet to come. Thus also the prophecy of Malachi must fit the times of John. He carries the line of the prophets down to John's times and permits no one to pass by— And so we conclude with certainty that no other Elijah is to come, and that the Gospel will endure unto the end of the world.

"Art thou the prophet? And he answered, No."

20. Some think the Jews here asked concerning that prophet of whom Moses writes in Deuteronomy 18:15 "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me, etc." But this passage St. Peter in Acts 3:22 and St. Stephen in Acts 7:37 apply to Christ himself, which is the correct interpretation. The Jews also certainly held this prophet in equal esteem with Moses, above Elijah, and therefore understood him to be Christ. They asked John whether he was an ordinary prophet, like the others, since he was neither Christ nor Elijah. For they had had no prophet since the days of Malachi, who was the last and concluded the Old Testament with the above mentioned prophecy concerning the coming of Elijah. John therefore is the nearest to and first after Malachi, who in finishing his book points to him. - The Jews then asked whether he was one of the prophets. Christ likewise says of him, Matthew 11:9 "Wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet." And Matthew says in 21:26, "All hold John as a prophet."

21. Now the question arises, Did John really confess the truth when he denied that he was Elijah or a prophet, whereas Christ himself called him Elijah and more than a prophet? He himself knew that he had come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and that the Scriptures called him Elijah. To say, therefore, that he did not consider himself a prophet because he was more than a prophet, is disgraceful and makes him an empty boaster. The truth of the matter is, that he simply and in a straightforward manner confessed the truth, namely, that he was not that Elijah about whom they asked, nor a prophet. For the prophets commonly led and taught the people, who sought advice and help from them. Such a one John was not and would not be, for the Lord was present, whom they were to follow and adhere to. He did not desire to draw the people to himself, but to lead them to Christ, which was needful before Christ himself came.

A prophet foretells the coming of Christ. John, however, shows him present, which is not a prophet's task. Just so a priest in the bishop's presence would direct the people away from himself to the bishop, saying, "I am not priest; yonder is your priest"; but in the bishop's absence he would rule the people in the place of the bishop.

22. John likewise directs the people away from himself to Christ. And although this is a higher and greater office than that of a prophet, yet it is not so on account of his merit, but on account of the presence of his Master. And in praising John for being more than a prophet, not his worthiness but that of his Master, who is present, is extolled. For it is customary for a servant to receive greater honor and reverence in the absence of his master than in his presence.

23. Even so the rank of a prophet is higher than that of John, although his office is greater and more immediate. For a prophet rules and leads the people, and they adhere to him; but John does no more than direct them away from himself to Christ, the present Master. Therefore, in the simplest and most straightforward manner, he denied being a prophet, although abounding in all the qualities of a prophet. This he did for the sake of the people, in order that they might not accept his testimony as the foretelling of a prophet and expect Christ in other, future times, but that they might recognize him as a forerunner and guide, and follow his guidance to the Lord, who was present. Witness the following words of the text:

"They said therefore 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 Isaiah the prophet."

24. This is the second part of his confession, in which he declares what he is, after having denied that he was Christ, or Elijah, or a prophet. As though he were to say, Your salvation is much too near for a prophet to be required. Do not strain your eyes so far out into the future, for the Lord of all the prophets is himself here, so that no prophet is needed.

The Lord is coming this way, whose forerunner I am; he is treading on my heels. I am not prophesying of him as a seer, but crying as a courier, to make room for him as he walks along. I do not say, as the prophets, "Behold, he is to come"; but I say, "Behold, he is coming, he is here. I am not bringing word about him, but pointing to him with my finger. Did not Isaiah long ago foretell that such a crying to make room for the Lord should go before him? Such I am, and not a prophet. Therefore, step aside and make room, permit the Lord himself to walk among you bodily, and do not look for any more prophecies about him."

25. Now this is the answer which no learned, wise, and holy men can bear; therefore John must surely be a heretic and be possessed of the devil. Only sinners and fools think him a holy, pious man, listen to his crying and make room for the Lord, removing whatsoever obstructs his way. The others, however, throw logs, stones and dirt in his way, aye, they even kill both the Lord and his forerunner for presuming to say such things to him. And why? John tells them to prepare the way of the Lord. That is to say, they have not the Lord nor his way in them. What have they then? Where the Lord is not, nor his way, there must be man's own way, the devil, and all that is evil. Judge then, whether those holy wise people are not justly incensed at John, condemn his word, and finally slay both him and his Master! Shall he presume to hand such holy people over to the devil, and denounce all their doings as false, wicked and damnable, claiming that their ways are not the Lord's ways, that they must first of all prepare the Lord's ways, and that they have lived all their holy lives in vain?

26. Yet, if he quietly wrote it on a tablet, they might still hear it in patience. But he gives utterance to it, yea, he cries it aloud, and that not in a corner, but openly under the sky, in the wilderness, before all the world, utterly disgracing before everybody those saints with all their doings and discrediting them with all the people. Thus they lose all honor and profit which their holy life formerly brought them. This certainly such pious men cannot bear, but for God's and justice's sake they cannot damn that false doctrine, in order that the poor people may not be misled and the service of God be not corrupted; aye, finally, they will have to kill John and his Master, to serve and obey God the Father.

27. This, then, is the preparation of Christ's way and John's proper office. He is to humble all the world, and proclaim that they are all sinners - lost, damned, poor, miserable, pitiable people; that there is no life, work, or rank however holy, beautiful and good it may appear, but is damnable unless Christ our God dwell therein, unless he work, walk, live, be and do everything through faith in him; in short, that they all need Christ and should anxiously strive to share his grace.

Behold, where this is practiced, namely, that all man's work and life is as nothing, there you have the true crying of John in the wilderness and the pure and clear truth of Christianity, as St. Paul shows, Romans 3:23 "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." This is truly to humiliate man, to cut out and annihilate his presumption. Aye, this is indeed to prepare the way of the Lord, to give room and to make way.

28. Now here are found two kinds of people: some believe the crying of John and confess it to be what he says. These are the people to whom the Lord comes, in them his way is prepared and made even, as

St. Peter says in 1 Peter 5:5 "God giveth grace to the humble"; and the Lord himself says in Luke 18:14 "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted." You must here diligently learn, and understand spiritually what the way of the Lord is, how it is prepared, and what prevents him from finding room in us. The way of the Lord, as you have heard, is that he does all things within you, so that all our works are not ours but his, which comes by faith.

29. This, however, is not possible if you desire worthily to prepare yourself by praying, fasting, self-mortification, and your own works, as is now generally and foolishly taught during the time of Advent. A spiritual preparation is meant, consisting in a thoroughgoing knowledge and confession of your being unfit, a sinner, poor, damned, and miserable, with all the works you may perform. The more a heart is thus minded, the better it prepares the way of the Lord, although meanwhile possibly drinking fine wines, walking on roses, and not praying a word.

30. The hindrance, however, which obstructs the Lord's way, is formed not only in the coarse and palpable sin of adultery, wrath, haughtiness, avarice, etc., but rather in spiritual conceit and pharisaical pride, which thinks highly of its own life and good works, feels secure, does not condemn itself, and would remain uncondemned by another. Such, then, is the other class of men, namely, those that do not believe the crying of John, but call it the devil's, since it forbids good works and condemns the service of God, as they say. These are the people to whom most of all and most urgently it is said, "Prepare the way of the Lord," and who least of all accept it.

31. Therefore John speaks to them with cutting words in Luke 3:7-8 "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance." But, as said above, the more just people are urged to prepare the Lord's way, the more they obstruct it and the more unreasonable they become. They will not be told that their doings are not the Lord's, and finally, to the glory and honor of God, they annihilate the truth and the word of John, himself and his Master to boot.

32. Judge, then, whether it was not a mighty confession on the part of John, when he dared to open his mouth and proclaim that he was not Christ, but a voice to which they did not like to listen, chiding the great teachers and leaders of the people for not doing that which was right and the Lord's pleasure. And as it went with John, so it still goes, from the beginning of the world unto the end. For such conceited piety will not be told that it must first and foremost prepare the way of the Lord, imagining itself to sit in God's lap and desiring to be petted and flattered by having long ago finished the way, before God even thought of finding a way for them - those precious saints! The pope and his followers likewise have condemned the crying of John to prepare the Lord's way. Aye, it is an intolerable crying - except to poor, penitent sinners with aggrieved consciences, for whom it is the best of cordials.

33. But isn't it a perverse and strange manner of speaking to say, "I am the voice of one crying"? How can a man be a voice? He ought to have said, I am one crying with a voice! - But that it speaking according to the manner of the Scriptures. In Exodus 4:16 God spoke to Moses: "Aaron shall be to thee a mouth." And in Job 29:15 we read: "I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame." Similarly we say of a man that gold is his heart and money his life.

So here, "I am the voice of one crying" means: I am one who cries, and have received my name from my office; even as Aaron is called a mouth because of his speaking, I am a voice because of my crying. And that which in Hebrew reads *vox clamantis*, the voice of one crying, would be translated into Latin: *vox clamans*, a crying voice. Thus St. Paul in Romans 15:26 says *pauperes sanctorum*, the poor of the saints, instead of *pauperes sancti*, the poor saints; and 1 Timothy 3:16: *mysterium pietatis* (the mystery of godliness) instead of *mysterium pium* (the godly mystery). Instead of saying: The lan-

guage of the Germans, I had better say, the German language. Thus "a voice of one crying" means "a crying voice". In Hebrew there are many similar phrases.

And they had been sent from the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him: Why then baptizest thou if thou be not the Christ, nor Elijah, neither the prophet? John answered them, saying I baptize with water; in the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not, even he that cometh after me is preferred before me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.

34. It seems as though the Evangelist had omitted something in these words, and as if John's complete answer ought to be: "I baptize with water; but he has come among you who baptizes with fire". Thus Luke 3:16 says: 'I baptize you with water: but he shall baptize you with fire.' And in Acts 1:5 we read, "John baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost." But, although he here says nothing of this other baptism, he sufficiently indicates that there is to be another baptism, since he speaks of another who is coming after him and who, undoubtedly, will not baptize with water.

35. Now begins the second onset, whereby John was tried on the other side. For not being able to move him by allurements they attack him with threats. And here is uncovered their false humility, manifesting itself as pride and haughtiness. The same they would have done had John followed them, after they had had enough of him. Learn therefore here to be on your guard against men, particularly when they feign to be gentle and kind; as Christ says. Matthew 10:16-47 "Beware of men, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." That is to say, Do not trust those that are smooth, and do no evil to your enemies.

36. Behold, these Pharisees, who professed their willingness to accept John as the Christ, veer around when things turn out as they desired, and censure John's baptism. They say, as it were, "Since you are not Christ, nor Elijah, nor a prophet, you are to know that we are your superiors according to the law of Moses and you are therefore to conduct yourself as our subordinate. You are not to act independently, without our command, our knowledge and without our permission. Who has given you power to introduce something new among our people with your baptizing? You are bringing yourself into trouble with your criminal disobedience".

37. John however, as he had despised their hypocrisy, likewise scorns their threats, remains firm, and confesses Christ as before. Moreover he boldly attacks them and charges them with ignorance, saying, as it were: "I have no authority from you to baptize with water. But what of that? There is another from whom I have power; him you do not know, but he is amply sufficient for me. If you knew him, or wished to know him, you would not ask whence I have power to baptize, but you would come to be baptized yourselves. For he is so much greater than I, that I am not worthy to unloose his shoes' latchet.

38. John's words, "He it is who, coming after me, is preferred before me," three times quoted by the Evangelist in this chapter, have been misinterpreted and obscured by some who referred them to Christ's divine and eternal birth, as though John meant to say that Christ had been born before him in eternity. But what is remarkable is the fact that he was born before John in eternity, seeing that he was born before the world and all other things? Thus he was also to come not only after him, but after all things, since he is the first and the last (Revelation 1:11). Therefore, his past and his future agree. John's words are clear and simple, referring to Christ when he already was a man. The words "He will come after me" cannot be taken to mean that he would be born after him; John like Christ, was at that time about thirty years old.

39. These words then evidently apply to his preaching. He means to say: "I have come - that is, I have begun to preach but I shall soon stop, and another will come and preach after me." Thus St. Luke says, Acts 1:22, that Christ began from the baptism of John; and, Luke 3:23, that Jesus was thirty years old when he began. And Matthew 11:3 "Art thou he that should come," that is, he who should begin to

preach; for Christ's office does not begin till after his baptism, at which his father had acknowledged and glorified him. Then also began the New Testament and the time of grace, not at the birth of Christ, as he himself says, Mark 1:15 "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." Had he not begun to preach, his birth would have been of no use; but when he did begin to act and to teach, then were fulfilled all prophecies, all Scriptures, then came a new light, and a new world.

40. So we see what he means by saying, "He will come after me." But the meaning of the words, "He is preferred before me; he was before me," is not yet clear, some referring them to Christ's eternal birth. We maintain in all simplicity that those words also were spoken concerning their preaching. Thus the meaning is: "Although he is not yet preaching, but is coming after me, and I am preaching before him: nevertheless he is already at hand, and so close by that, before I began to preach, he has already been there and has been appointed to preach. The words "before me" therefore point to John's office, and not to his person. Thus, "he has been before my preaching and baptism for about thirty years; but he has not yet come, and has not yet begun. John thereby indicates his office, namely, that he is not a prophet foretelling the coming of Christ, but one who precedes him who is already present, who is so near that he has already been in existence so many years before his beginning and coming.

41. Therefore he also says: "In the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not." He means to say: "Do not permit your eyes to wander off into future ages. He of whom the prophets speak has been among you in the Jewish nation for well nigh thirty years. Take care and do not miss him. You do not know him, therefore I have come to point him out to you." The words, "In the midst of you standeth one," are spoken after the manner of the Scriptures, which say, A prophet will arise or stand up. Thus Matthew 24:24, "There shall arise false prophets." Deuteronomy 18:15 God says, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet." John now wishes to show that this "raising up, arising, standing," etc. was fulfilled in Christ, who was already standing among them, as God had prophesied; the people however knew him not.

42. This then is the other office of John and of every preacher of the Gospel, not alone to make all the world sinners, as we have heard above (§24ff.); but also to give comfort and show how we may get rid of our sins; this he does in pointing to him who is to come. Hereby he directs us to Christ, who is to redeem us from our sins, if we accept him in true faith. The first office says: "You are all sinners, and are wanting in the way of the Lord." When we believe this, the other office follows and says; "Listen, and accept Christ, believe in him, he will free you of your sins." If we believe this, we have it. Of this we shall say more anon.

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

43. So diligently does the Evangelist record the testimony of John, that he also mentions the places where it happened. The confession of Christ is greatly dependent on testimony, and there are many difficulties in the way. Undoubtedly, however, he wished to allude to some spiritual mystery of which we shall now speak.

## ***II. The Spiritual Meaning of this Gospel Story***

44. This is the sum and substance of it: In this Gospel is pictured the preacher's office of the New Testament, what it is, what it does, and what happens to it.

45. First, it is the voice of one calling, not a piece of writing. The Law and the Old Testament are dead writings, put into books, and the Gospel is to be a living voice. Therefore John is an image, and a type,

and also a pioneer, the first of all preachers of the Gospel. He writes nothing, but calls out everything with his living voice.

46. Secondly, the Old Testament or the Law was preached among the tents at Mount Sinai, to the Jews alone. But John's voice is heard in the wilderness, freely and openly, under the heavens, before all the world.

47. Thirdly, it is a calling, clear and loud voice, that is to say, one that speaks boldly and undauntedly and fears no one, neither death, hell, life nor the world, neither devil, man, honor, disgrace nor any creature. Thus Isaiah says in 40:6 ff: "The voice of one saying, cry. And one said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever." And further: "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up on a high mountain; lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid." The world cannot bear the Gospel, and hence there must be a strength, which scorns it and can call against it without fear.

48. Fourthly, John's raiment is of camel's hair and has a leather girdle (Matthew 3:4). This means the strict and chaste life of preachers, but above all it points to the manner of the preachers of the Gospel. It is a voice not given to soft phrases, neither does it deal in hypocrisy and flattery. It is a sermon of the cross, a hard, rough sharp speech for the natural man, and girds the loins for spiritual and bodily chastity. This is taken from the life and words of the patriarchs of old, who like camels have borne the burden of the Law and of the cross. "He eats locusts and wild honey." This means those that accept the Gospel, namely, the humble sinners, who take the Gospel unto and into themselves.

49. Fifthly, John is on the other side of the Jordan. "Jordan" really means the Holy Scriptures, which have two sides. One, the left side, is the external meaning which the Jews sought in Holy Writ; here John is not. For this interpretation does not produce sinners, but saints proud of their works. The right side is the true spiritual understanding, which discards and kills all works, in order that faith alone may remain, in all humility. This meaning is brought out in the Gospels, as St. Paul does, Romans 3:23, saying: "All have sinned."

50. Sixthly, here begins the dispute between true and false preachers. The Pharisees cannot bear to hear John's voice, they despise his teaching and baptism, and remain obdurate in their doings and teachings. On account of the people however they pretend to think highly of him. But because he opposes their will, he must be possessed of the devil, they say, and finally he must be beheaded by Herod. So it is now and so it has always been. No false teacher wishes it to be said of him that he preaches without or against the Gospel, but on the contrary that he thinks highly of it and believes in it. Nevertheless he does violence to it, making it conform to his meaning. This the Gospel cannot permit, for it stands firm and never lies. Then it is reviled as heresy and error, yea as a devilish doctrine. And finally they apply violence prohibiting it and striking off its head so that it may nowhere be preached or heard. This was done by the pope in the case of John Huss.

51. Thus he is a truly Christian preacher who preaches nothing but that which John proclaimed, and firmly insists upon it.

First, he must preach the Law so that the people may learn what great things God demands of us; of these we cannot perform any because of the impotence of our nature which has been corrupted by Adam's fall. Then comes the baptism in Jordan. The cold water means the teaching of the Law, which does not kindle love but rather extinguishes it. For through the Law man learns how difficult and how impossible of fulfillment the Law is. Then he becomes hostile to it, and his love for it cools; he feels that he heartily hates it. This of course is a grievous sin, to be hostile to God's commands. There-

fore man must humble himself, and confess that he is lost and that all his works are sins, aye, that his whole life is sinful. Herewith then John's baptism has been accomplished, and he has been, not only besprinkled, but properly baptized. Then he sees why John says, "Repent ye". He understands that John is right, and that everyone must needs become a better man and repent. But Pharisees and those holy in their works do not arrive at this knowledge, nor do they permit themselves to be baptized. They imagine that they do not need repentance, and therefore John's words and baptism are foolishness in their eyes.

52. Furthermore, when the first teaching, that of the Law, and baptism are over and man, humiliated by the knowledge of himself, is forced to despair of himself and his powers; then begins the second part of John's teaching, in which he directs the people from himself to Christ and says: "Behold the Lamb of God that takes upon itself the sin of the world." By this he means to say: "First I have, by my teaching, made you all sinners, have condemned your works and told you to despair of yourselves. But in order that you may not also despair of God, behold, I will show you how to get rid of your sins and obtain salvation. Not that you can strip off your sins or make yourselves pious through your works; another man is needed for this; nor can I do it, I can point him out, however. It is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. He, he, and no one else either in heaven or on earth takes our sins upon himself. You yourself could not pay for the very smallest of sins. He alone must take upon himself not alone your sins, but the sins of the world, and not some sins, but all the sins of the world, be they great or small, many or few." This then is preaching and, hearing the pure Gospel, and recognizing the finger of John, who points out to you Christ, the Lamb of God.

53. Now, if you are able to believe that this voice of John speaks the truth, and if you are able to follow his finger and recognize the Lamb of God carrying your sin, then you have gained the victory, then you are a Christian, a master of sin, death, hell, and all things. Then your conscience will rejoice and become heartily fond of this gentle Lamb of God. Then will you love, praise, and give thanks to our heavenly Father for this infinite wealth of his mercy, preached by John and given in Christ. And finally you will become cheerful and willing to do his divine will, as best you can, with all your strength. For what lovelier and more comforting message can be heard than that our sins are not ours any more, that they no more lie on us, but on the Lamb of God. How can sin condemn such an innocent Lamb? Lying on him, it must be vanquished and made to be nothing, and likewise death and hell, being the reward of sin, must be vanquished also. Behold what God our Father has given us in Christ!

54. Take heed, therefore, take heed, I say, lest you presume to get rid of the smallest of your sins through your own merit before God, and lest you rob Christ, the Lamb of God, of his credit. John indeed demands that we grow better and repent; but that he does not mean us to grow better of ourselves and to strip off our sins by our own strength, this he declares powerfully by adding, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." As we have said above (§29), he means that each one is to know himself and his need of becoming a better man; yet he is not to look for this in himself, but in Jesus Christ alone. Now may God our Father according to his infinite mercy bestow upon us this knowledge of Christ, and may he send into the world the voice of John, with great numbers of evangelists! Amen.