

THE MYSTERY OF THE AGES REVEALED

Hear again the Word of the Lord for this fourth Sunday of Advent,

John answered them, saying, "I baptize in water; (in the) midst of all of you stands One Whom all of you do not know, the One after me coming, of whom not I am worthy that I may loose the leather straps of His sandals."¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

God has once again brought us, in sure and certain hope; in peace with Him and fellow believers; in joy in our being declared right with Him; into the Sunday which declares His love in sending His Son to bring life to those conceived dead in trespasses and sin. Today we hear of the coming One Who is greater than even the greatest of the Old Testament prophets and how He comes to His people. We have the Mystery of the Ages revealed. This the Word has done through a Gospel narrative to which both St. Paul and Jesus refer in order to unequivocally state Jesus' Messiahship, to declare Him the Christ, the Anointed One of God. Our Good News Word for today ends:

These things became in Bethany, (a) region of the Jordan where John was baptizing.²

That ending means that, once again, we have heard an earthly historical record of eternal realities. Foremost among them is the truth that today our text speaks about the One for whom John's baptism made straight the way; the One Whose baptism would be exceedingly greater.

This is not the only place in Scripture where we may learn of the One Who was coming to bring to sinner so more than a baptism into repentance. A few other biblical texts contain remembrances of the long ago events at the Jordan River as occurring at a particular time and in a general location.³ Such parallels indicate that this reading is very important for our lives in the Church, in Christ. We are to know that the "coming of our Lord," of which the Word of God speaks into our ears each year at this time is not simply

¹ John 1:26-27.

² John 1:28

³ Luke 3:1-6; Matthew 3:1-3; John 3:26 and 10:40.

ethereal and spiritual. It is very much physical and earthly. Today we hear of a real event in time, with worldly and other-worldly realities. That means that we have before us, in our hearts through our ears, a time-stamped documented testimony of God's witness to His truths, as our text for this day begins to declare:

And this remains the witness of the John, when the Jews from Jerusalem sent [to him] priests and Levites in order that they might ask him, "Who are you?"⁴

What is also interesting, in the responses following that question, is that the Christ is not named. First, John denies in a threefold manner that he is not the Christ. The man, Gospel writers other than St. John call the "Baptizing One," points his hearers to an unnamed Other. In fact, He is only referred to as the "One." Second, John declares that that "One" is then unknown to his hearers. "The One" is, with regard to John's presence in time, at the Jordan, in Judea, in the world, truly for him, "the One after me coming." Third, we learn from John that the Coming One is exceedingly greater than the one who was sent by God to herald His coming.

From the very time the happenings of our text took place, until our day, and likely even unto the Last Day, confusion exists about the relationship of John and his work and Jesus and His work by those who are, at least physically, in the Church. Initially, the beginning of John's Gospel tells us, in time, there was a man, sent from God. The first witnesses to that man's word and work surmised that he was God's "sent one." That was on account of John's dress, diet, message, mannerisms and boldness in preaching a baptism into repentance. When the best Bible students/teachers of the first century AD

⁴ John 1:19.

observed John, they beheld all the marks of a true prophet of God. That is one reason why they sent priests and Levites (all men who would regularly serve at God's Temple, and be very regular in hearing the Lord's Word through the prophets in the readings of the Lord's Services) to ask John, "Who are you?" His answer to that query is significant:

[John] confessed, and not he denied, and he confessed, "I (am) not I AM, the Christ."⁵

It appears in the Gospel of St. John, that this is the only time such a formula of confession, denial and confession is used. What is somewhat veiled in our translations is that its employment gives divine weight to the testimony itself. The translation you have heard just now tries to stress is that which the Greek of St. John communicates. John makes his confession in part using two words our congregation's students of the Gospel of John know represent the Divine Name. One word separating them, a little οὐκ which we translate, "not," makes all the difference between who John is and, later Who Jesus declares Himself to be.

Now, God has not called and gathered all of us here today to become biblical linguists. Yet, there is something divinely important happening in this Advent text which can really set us up, as hearers of the Word, for that which will be proclaimed in a couple of days. So, I am going to ask you to really listen to two short phrases. They will be proclaimed in an ancient language used by God to first communicate His truths to the New Testament Church. One word is the only difference that you will hear, and it makes all the difference in time and eternity for the message of Advent. Here we go:

The first phrase: ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμι ὁ χριστός;

The second phrase: ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ χριστός

The first phrase may be literally rendered: "I, **not**, I AM the Christ." The second phrase may be literally rendered: "I, I AM the Christ." The use means that the speaker is

⁵ John 1:20.

not only denying that he is the Anointed One of God, the Christ, but that the speaker is also not God. The second use means that the Speaker is not only *the* Christ, but that He is God. In St. John's Gospel, ἐγὼ εἶμι, "I, I AM" is the term Jesus uses for Himself, synonymous with the Hebrew: אני

What we may learn from the way the text is recorded, 1) John knew his vocation—preacher; 2) John believed, in some form, that the Christ is God; and, 3) John knew he was not the Anointed One of God, the Christ. All of that makes John's succeeding denials to the questions asked of him by the sent men. For, if John were the Christ, and as the Christ is God, he would have answered and testified to himself as Jesus later did about Himself. Hear again the questions—good biblical tests—concerning John's ministry:

*And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"
and he said, "Not I."
"The prophet, are you?"
And he answered, "No."⁶*

Perhaps the proclamation before those quotes has helped to clear up the apparent conflict between John's testimony about himself, and Jesus' later witness about John. Jesus, the "Coming One" of Whom John spoke, is the Christ, is God, the ἐγὼ εἶμι, "I, I AM." As such, He knows the things which His prophets and preachers do not know about themselves or about the fullness of the Office into which God has cast them. To aid in understanding, consider two examples, one from the Scriptures, and one from recent history.

The first, as Jesus was sent to Pilate to be condemned to die in your sins, the High Priest, Caiaphas, uttered prophecy. He did so out of the Office into which God had called him. Caiaphas appears to have never in this life discerned the real meaning of that which he advised:

Do you all not reckon that (it is) expedient for us that one Man may die for all the people and not (that the) whole of the nation may have perished.⁷

⁶ John 1:21.

⁷ John 11:50.

The second in recent history, as a man was visiting a client, a pastor of another Lutheran confession of faith, the pastor declared to him, "You will do well in seminary." The layman, shocked by the statement, declared emphatically, "I am not going to seminary!" To which the pastor replied, "Of course, you never mentioned that... I do not know where that thought came from?" (That dialogue took place after the pastor asked for and received from the layman advice about a particularly sensitive sin-situation in the congregation, that which the pastor should not have asked to not violate the Office of the Confessional). Even so, that prophecy out of the Preaching Office was given and denied by both men around 1990. More than 20 years later, the man who denied he was ever going to seminary stands here declaring the Word of God. Men who are called to do such often do not comprehend how that Word will work in time.

Like John in a positive way, and Caiaphas in a negative way, men in the Office Christ has given to His Church often do not know the full meaning of the Word they are given to declare. Caiaphas and the pastor of another confession knew they were to declare the Word. John knew that he was to preach a baptism into the repentance of sin. Yet John did not know who he really was in terms of God's fulfilling His own Word. (It took the Word in our flesh, Jesus, to make John's full role in God's fulfillment of prophecy clear). Even so, John knew his work in the Preaching Office, as we hear again:

They said then to him, "Who are you?... that (an) answer we may give to the ones sending us; what do you say concerning yourself?"⁸

He said, "I am (the) Voice crying in the wilderness: 'All of you make straight the way of (the) Lord,' just as Isaiah the prophet said."⁹

From that and parallel texts, it is clear that John knew his calling, his vocation, his Office. God called him to preach the Word of repentance. His words were proclaimed to bring down the proud and to raise up those bound in sin. John's work was to prepare a smooth way for the Lord. He was laboring in the wilderness that the Word he declared

⁸ John 1:22.

⁹ John 1:23.

might show people their sins and move them to will to turn from them. He preached the Law, so that, when the Word, the I, I AM, the Christ, came with the Gospel, people's hearts would be ready for the forgiveness He was to die to bring to them. To hearts leveled by the Word of conviction, condemning and killing, would come the Word of atoning, acquitting, and enlivening. Our text continues:

And they having been sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him and they said to him, "Why then do you baptize if you do not remain the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the Prophet?"

*John answered them, saying, "I baptize in water; (in the) midst of all of you stands One Whom all of you do not know, the One after me coming, of Whom **not** I am worthy that I may loose the leather straps of His sandals."¹⁰*

John knew his place, even if he did not know what God in our flesh would declare him to be.¹¹ When he declared the Coming One, John declared his own place in the Office of Old Testament prophet. God had revealed to him that that Office was passing away. John taught that his washing with water, a preparatory bath, would be superseded. The Baptizer, to whom many were coming in repentance, knew that the ministry of the Law was drawing to an end. That was because it had been revealed to him that the greater ministry of God was coming, and even then, was among God's people. John's testimony, which was greatly received, his Office, ordained by God, was, in relation to the testimony and Office that was coming, even lower than that of a household slave of the era. John declared his own worthiness before the Coming One.

How about you? What is your worthiness in the Face of the Advent of our Lord?

In yourself, in your devotions, your study of the Word, your "going to Church," your goodness and holy works, you are not good enough to serve the Lord. If you wish to stand in your vocation on your own when the Coming One arrives, you will be under His feet (that means that you will not be part of the Body of Christ). If you want to rely

¹⁰ *John* 1:24-27.

¹¹ cf. *Matthew* 11:14; *Mark* 9:11-12

on John's baptism – which still exists in a non-biblical teaching about the same – your repentance into the forgiveness of sins, you will not be one with Christ on the Last Day.

Yet, you who have been washed with the Baptism of Jesus have been declared right with the Lord. In the washing God gave you, you received the full regeneration and renewal He promised. Your sins you have not just been repented of and willed to have been turned from, your sins have been taken away – by God, the One Who is greater than John. The Coming One has come to you. Even so, He comes to you now. His alien Word calls you to turn from sin and walk in newness of life, and His healing Word gives you His power to do so!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Advent IV Sermon (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)
Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Philippians 4:4-7; John 1:19-28
December 21, 2014
Pastor Michael H. Merhouse
Soli Deo Gloria

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These things became in Bethany, (a) region of the Jordan where John was baptizing.²¹

¹² John 1:19.

¹³ John 1:20.

¹⁴ John 1:21.

¹⁵ John 1:22.

¹⁶ John 1:23.

¹⁷ John 1:24.

¹⁸ John 1:25.

¹⁹ John 1:26.

²⁰ John 1:27.

²¹ John 1:28