

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT / RORATE COELI

Text: St. John 1:19-28

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” St. John the Baptist went before our LORD to declare and bear witness to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven in the person of JESUS CHRIST. Therefore, John points to the One to be stricken, smitten, and afflicted; the One to be chastised for our peace and nailed to a cross for our iniquities. He points to the EMMANUEL, to God with us—God in human flesh and blood. John points to the One whose sandal strap neither John, who is the greatest born of woman, nor you, nor I, are worthy to untie. He points to JESUS CHRIST, for wherever one finds JESUS, the King of kings and King of Heaven, there also, is the Kingdom of Heaven.

That is the testimony of John. That is the testimony he confessed and did not deny. For John was a *“prophet of the Highest; sent before the face of the LORD to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

Today, St. John the Baptist calls to you in your wilderness. John enters your desert, the desert of sin, preaching redemption through repentance and Baptism, in order to prepare you for the coming of our LORD. He calls on you to admit that you are not the CHRIST; that you are not God. He wants you to admit that you are a sinner who is helpless to save yourself. He points you to JESUS and tells you that without Him you are doomed.

John wants you to take JESUS out of the box you keep locked away; the box marked *“for emergencies”* and *“holidays only.”* He urges you to remember JESUS, to come to Him, to rely on Him, and *only* Him, calling upon Him at all times for all things. He wants you to *“be anxious for nothing”* but to put your faith in JESUS so that *“by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving ... your requests be made known to God.”*

This is what St. John was sent to do; this is the message he was sent to preach. John came to tell us to *“make straight the way of the LORD.”* He came to warn us that the axe is about to be *“laid to the root of the trees.”* He warns us that we are not worthy of heaven simply because we have Abraham, or even Luther, as our father. For God is able to raise up children to Abraham and Luther from stones. His message warns us that we are to *“bear fruits worthy of repentance.”* We are not to live happily smug in dead faith.

But this message is not a message we like to hear. This message offends our twenty-first century ears. We find St. John's preaching too stringent, His teaching much too inflexible. We think that maybe, just maybe, he spent too much time in his camel hair suit. Perhaps his diet of insects gave him indigestion, making him mean and cantankerous. Whatever the case, we do not like his style, and we do not like his JESUS either.

We would rather that John preach a cuddly JESUS. We do not want a just and righteous JESUS; we want a tolerant JESUS. We do not want a JESUS who deals strictly in black and white. We want a JESUS who deals in various shades of gray. We want a smorgasbord JESUS so we can pick and choose what we like, what we will accept while leaving the rest behind—thank you very much. In the end, the JESUS we would prefer would not deal in heaven and hell. For us, that is just too absolute, too judgmental. No, we would prefer a feckless JESUS, a JESUS who is morally neutral, a milquetoast Jesus, an indifferent and spineless JESUS.

But this is not the JESUS of Holy Scripture, and this is certainly not the JESUS John preached. The JESUS preached by St. John the Baptist, is the JESUS who came to satisfy the righteous wrath of the FATHER—His FATHER and ours—by fulfilling the Law and all its requirements.

JESUS did this because you cannot. You cannot fulfill God's Law even though you might try. In fact, even all your righteous works are nothing more than filthy acts before God, worthy of nothing more than repentance. But the Law does not care; it has its requirements and they must be fulfilled. Someone must die.

So, no, John is not very tolerant, and neither is his JESUS, for His JESUS is God and the most fundamental, the most basic thing about God is that, He is the only One; there is no other. And this God will not share affections, He will not share loyalty, He will not share worship, for He says, *"...I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me."*

So, no, God is not very tolerant either. If you will have Him, you can have no other. It is *"take Him or leave Him, all or nothing."* He will tolerate no other gods, nor is there any room with God for sin. But then, that is why we are so intolerant of God, because the most fundamental thing, the most basic thing about fallen humanity, and therefore the most fundamental thing about you and me, is that we want to be our own god and we have come to believe there is no such thing as sin as long as we satisfy our selfish desires.

Repent! Repent and hear the voice of the one who cries out from the wilderness. Hear his voice because it carries a message that is a matter of life and death—your life and your death. To hear John is life, to ignore him and live as though his message does not matter, but as though your life and desires matter most, is to court death and eternal destruction.

John cries out to you that you would open your eyes by first opening your ears. He tells you of the One who has come to Baptize you “... *with the HOLY SPIRIT and fire.*” He comes to tell you that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and that it comes with “... *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” and none other.

This sinless Lamb came into the world bringing with Him grace and truth, “... *for the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through JESUS CHRIST.*”

And what is that truth? It is the love of God, who loved you so much that He refused to leave you dead in your sin. Instead, He sent the Light and Life of men into our sinful and pain-filled existence, and as many as believe in Him, He gives the right to become children of God. Our LORD came to bring freedom for the captives and salvation to the oppressed. He came as our Great High Priest to enter into the Holy of Holies, “... *not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own Blood.*” He came as a Holy Sacrifice, to die, so that you may live.

That Lamb of God who came to die, rose from the grave on the third day. He lives and gives to you the benefits of His terrible suffering and death. It is into this Lamb that you were Baptized; not with water only, but with water and the HOLY SPIRIT. This means that the Blood CHRIST poured out on Golgotha was poured over you. That same Blood is poured into you at this altar—His altar. As it passes your lips it marks the doorposts of your heart and death passes over. With these blessed Sacraments JESUS makes you alive together with Him and in Him.

JESUS has given His life as a ransom for yours. He has loved you beyond all telling, beyond all imagining, beyond all human understanding, and He still does. So, come, be united with Him in the Feast laid out before you. Be forgiven, renewed, restored, reinvigorated, and at peace. The Passover Lamb has been slain. In His blessed death is the death of your sins. He now lives again, leaving behind the grave where He buried your sins. So, eat this Lamb and drink His Blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

No longer do you have to fear death and eternal torment. You no longer have to because JESUS died for you. In Baptism you died with Him and were raised with Him to newness of life in His resurrection. He died, but now He lives and whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. He died in your place, for you. In His death and resurrection He gives to you His righteousness, His innocence, His

blessedness. This is the message preached by St. John the Baptist, and to this day, it is the message the Church and all pastors are called to preach.

This message brings the peace announced by angels to the shepherds at our LORD's birth in Bethlehem. It is the peace of not living under the burden of the Law, but under the grace and love of God. It is the peace of being counted worthy by Grace through faith *alone*. It is the peace of hearing the Lamb of God say, "*I forgive you all your sins.*"

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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