

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

This last week I was treated to a phone call from a friend, her family prominent in the LCMS's hallowed ranks. She calls yearly at this time of the year, and we talk about how our lives are going. This year, she mentioned some of her challenges: cousins, all men, sons of a pastor, in their youth being groomed to be pastors themselves, who attended the Seminary in St. Louis, who are no longer followers of Christ. One now calls himself a Buddhist; another calls himself a pagan. While at the seminary, they also attended Washington University and were taken "*captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world,*" and they forsook Christ.

That was many years ago, but this saintly woman, like St. Paul, continues to "*yearn for [them] all with the affection of Christ Jesus.*" She continues to talk to them of her hope in Christ, which caused one of the cousins to ask about heaven. She confessed, but he couldn't believe it, for he wanted proof. "*Where's the empirical proof for heaven?*"

Of course, that kind of proof would be hard to come by. There are no instruments to measure heaven, no experiment that one could devise to demonstrate its existence. But it is described in the Bible, often in figurative language, filled with metaphor. Perhaps Jesus' words say it most simply: heaven is the Father's house, where He has gone to prepare a place for us, so that we might be with Him forever. And how can we trust Jesus' words? Jesus rose from the dead. That's fact; that's history. Jesus rose and ascended into heaven. This may not be the experimental, repeatable proof he was wanting, but it is empirical, based on eyewitness reports.

This is what distinguishes Christianity from so many of the world's religions. The Scriptures are not a collection of "*cleverly devised myths,*" born out of "*the will of man*" to give us lessons on morality. Rather the writers were eyewitnesses of what they bear witness to, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, they give us God's own word. So that in our text today, Luke makes it clear that what he was describing here was not made up "*a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....*" It was history with real historical actors.

Luke orients us as he introduces us to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. He reminds us as we prepare for the yearly festival of the coming of the Lord as a baby in Bethlehem, that John was to come first as the "*voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'*" And as the messenger: "*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.*"

Luke orients us in another direction in the midst of our sentimental Christmas preparations. Today, we hear not of Caesar Augustus, but Tiberius Caesar. Today

we hear not of Herod the Great, who killed the Bethlehem innocents in order to destroy the King of the Jews, but of his sons Herod Antipas and Philip. We hear of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. These are not the cast of characters of Jesus' birth, but of His ministry: His life and death and resurrection.

We meet John the Baptist out in the wilderness preaching a *"baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,"* getting ready to baptize the adult Jesus beginning His ministry, not the infant Jesus starting to crawl at his mother's feet. Of course, we know that John the Baptist preceded Jesus out of the womb by a mere 6 months, and yet John proclaims Jesus as One who came before him, the One mightier than he, whose sandals John was not worthy to stoop down and untie.

Indeed, already in the womb, with a jump and a kick, John proclaimed Jesus as the Savior to his mother Elizabeth. But that kick in the side was just the foretaste of the preparation that John came to do. John came to fill up the valleys and lay low the mountains. He came to straighten the crooked and smooth out the rough places. And he did that by preaching repentance: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* It is the preaching of repentance that prepares our *"flesh"* to *"see the salvation of God."*

To be sure, some would see their salvation in the incarnation. Mary would see it. *"See, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,"* and He will be king in the line of David, an everlasting king. And Mary responded, *"my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."* The shepherds would see it. *"Come let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."* *"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."* Faithful Simeon would see it—the Holy Spirit told him that He would see *"the Lord's Christ"*. And when He did, He sang, *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples."*

But most flesh sees their salvation in the Christ who was lifted up, not gazing up into heaven wishing for some kind of sign, but looking to Him who was lifted up on a cross — that they might be saved. For that is the will of the Father: *"that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life. And He will raise them up on the last day."*

This is the Christ that John the Baptist points us to by his preaching of the coming of the kingdom—not the cuddly babe in the manger, but the One who gives up His life as sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is what John does by his preaching of repentance: he calls us to look not to ourselves or our churchly

pedigrees (Abraham's sons, Luther's sons), but to look to the "*Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.*"

To be sure John also points us to the One who will come again to judge the living and the dead. We hear, "*His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" But that's to make us a people prepared, with lives filled with repentance and fruit in keeping with repentance, for on the last day when every eye beholds Him coming again in glory in the clouds, it will be too late. There is no longer any repentance. The judgment will be upon us. And there will be great wailing on account of Him.

Therefore, John the Baptist points us while living especially to the Christ sacrificed for our sin, that we might repent, believe and be saved. He points us to the One who "*will tend his flock like a shepherd*"—laying down His life for His sheep, gathering His lambs in His arms, carrying them in His bosom, not letting one be snatched from His loving hands.

But it's not that they are two Christ's or three Christ's. The difference is not with Jesus—He is the same Christ, in the manger, on the cross, on His throne. He was always the One who came to scatter "*the proud in the imaginations of their hearts.*" He was always the One who came to bring "*down the mighty from their thrones.*" He was always the One who came to send the rich "*away empty*"—but on the other hand to fill "*the hungry with good things,*" and to exalt "*those of low degree.*" He was always the One that came to "*proclaim liberty*" and "*recovering of sight*" and "*the Lord's favor.*"

You see, the difference is not in Christ—there is one Christ, who came to serve and give His life as a ransom for sin. There is one Christ, who came to humble the proud, calling the people to repentance; there is one Christ who came baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire, calling us to faith, giving us forgiveness of sin; there is one Christ who came enlightening our sin darkened lives by the lamp of His word. The difference is not in the cuddly Christ versus the bloodied Christ. They're one and the same. The difference is in our attitude toward them.

For who is fearful of a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths? Sweet and innocent? Helpless? Who thinks in terms of repentance when approaching the manger to catch a glimpse of the newborn Jesus? Who thinks of his sin as we sing our comforting Christmas lullabies? How many want to have Jesus in the manger, but take Him off the cross? But we need to remember, already there, in the manger, Jesus has taken on your sins. Already there, He is your substitute. The babe in the manger is the same Christ who was nailed to the tree.

So listen to Luke who orients you in your Advent preparations back to life and death and resurrection. Listen to John the Baptist as you prepare the way of the Lord. Repent of all attempts to obscure the cross in this holy season. As you approach the season of the incarnation of our Lord, may his preaching prepare your hearts and eyes to see Jesus for who He is — the salvation of God, the Savior of the world, the lamb slaughtered for your sins. Having thus prepared, come and receive the Body and Blood of the one Christ, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.