

The Message Of John.

Text: Luke 3:3-14

1) The message of sin

Suggested Hymns:

2) The message of salvation

6, 12, 13, 376, 14

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 3:3-14, ³ *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; ⁶ And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

⁷ *Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ ‘Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹ ‘And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’”*

¹⁰ *So the people asked him, saying, ‘What shall we do then?’ ¹¹ He answered and said to them, ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’ ¹² Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ ¹³ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what is appointed for you.’ ¹⁴ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall we do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.’” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text sets down historical events of vital importance. At first glance this may not be apparent. In an obscure section of the Roman Empire a Jewish preacher begins to preach.

Although many people come to hear him, Rome's historians do not even make a mention of his activity. They tell of the stern commands of Rome's emperors and the victorious march of her armies.

But God, with a perfect knowledge of all historical events and an unfailing perspective of man's history, is not awed by *"the grandeur that was Rome."* He deliberately brushes aside the record of Rome's mighty deeds for they pale into insignificance in His sight. Rather, God tells of the seemingly unprofitable work of the preacher in the wilderness. This is what is important.

Notice the importance which the Gospel of Luke attaches to the preaching of John, ¹ *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,* ² *while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.* ³ *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*¹

Note that in order to introduce John properly, he is listed with one Roman emperor, one Roman governor, three tetrarchs, and two Jewish high priests. Truly, John is an important figure in the history of the world.

Again, John came and preached ⁴ *as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet.* Seven hundred years before John's birth this figure looms up so large in the view of God that his coming is foretold.

Again, as we read in Matthew 11:11, ¹¹ *"Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist."* This appraisal is placed upon John by Christ.

It is the work of a person that determines his importance. Preaching was John's work. This work was given to John by God through Isaiah, *The voice of one crying in the wilderness.* This work God assigns to John through Zacharias,

⁷⁶ *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest.”*² This work John accepted as his special task, *“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”*

The essence of John’s message was to point to Jesus who *“stands ... among you whom you do not know.”*³ John preached Christ. ³⁶ *“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life.”*⁴

Christ is standing among us. We know Him. But we need to know Him better. And so we need to heed to *The Message of John the Baptist*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Reduced To Its Simplest Terms, The Preaching Of John Was A Message Of Sin

The message of John deals a lot with sin. This is necessary. The history of man is the history of sin. It is one long, dismal record of fall and failure. With scathing words John paints sin’s ghastly picture. In unmistakable language he speaks of its consequences. He speaks of *“sins,” “Brood of vipers,” “the wrath to come,” “the ax is laid to the root of the trees and thrown into the fire.”*

John does not undertake to prove the reality of sin. In the Old Testament eleven different descriptive terms for sin are used. To the hearers of John the reality of sin was not a matter of dispute. The problem, then as always, appears to have been to preach in such a manner that his hearers readily singled themselves out as the people who did the sinning. This skill God had given to John.

John was not a generalizer who, while speaking thundering words about sin, is unable to discover sins. He is not a preacher whose hearers complacently leave the church, satisfied that there is much sin around them, but not in them.

His preaching goes home to the individual - *“You are the man.”* The people responded - *“What shall we do?”* The tax collectors asked - *“What shall we do?”* The soldiers replied - *“What shall we do ?”*

The particular sins which lay as a hindrance in the way of the Lord, God had named to Isaiah. *And every mountain and hill brought low.* John uses the imagery of Isaiah. A road is to be built from one place to another. Between those two places lie hills and mountains.

For thousands of feet they rise, into the region of the clouds. They seem to offer insurmountable obstacles. Hills and mountains are symbols of anything to which natural man in his corrupt spiritual condition looks up to with satisfaction.

In such hills and mountains Israel abounded. The idea that they were a special people had taken firm root in the hearts of the Jews. *'We have Abraham as our father,'* they thought with serene satisfaction. They imagined that the blood of Abraham was the only noble strain.

In proportion as they exalted themselves as descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, they lost sight of the essential glory of Abraham, faith in the Messiah. Their religion had become a matter of forms, and worship had settled into a round of externals. Self-righteousness was the besetting sin of Israel.

Hills and mountains abound in every land. The Jew laid his foul hands on his God-given religion and debased it; self-righteous man of Gentile blood develops his own code of religion and exalts it. Man's heart is always a proud heart. No sin of unregenerate man is more natural. Having cast aside the *"righteousness of God,"*⁵ he is reduced to the necessity of looking around for a substitute.

He decides what he wants to do and tops this bit of boldness with the brashness of demanding that God will be satisfied with his works. All this self-righteousness is constructed according to patterns made in hell. There is a *"made-in-hell"* stamp upon every deed that man does for the purpose of gaining the good will of God.

Such patterns Satan also sends to the addresses where Christians live. Have you ever caught yourself day-dreaming about the glory of being a member of the Lutheran Church without being keenly aware in what such glory consists?

Does a feeling of pride ever come over you because you are so — humble? When you think of your salvation, do you think of nothing, absolutely nothing, except Jesus? Where is there a Christian who is not assailed by pride in one of its varied insidious forms?

Every valley shall be filled. In a world of many mountains and hills there are also many valleys. The Grand Canyon is a tremendous depression in the earth's surface. It defies the skill of the road-builder.

Such a valley is a picture of a condition in the soul of man. Such a person does not strut through a fool's paradise of vaunting self-righteousness. There is something refreshing about his honesty. He is not merit-seeker; he sees no righteousness of his own.

As he was calmly and deliberately moving along his path of sin, God took him in hand. He begins to think of what he has been doing. Why his thoughts run along these lines he may not know, but he is thinking. There is something about him that ought not to be, and another thing, and yet more. A shocking picture begins to unfold before his startled eyes. A feeling of responsibility comes over him. God is asking questions, and He will not be put off.

Those questions are unanswerable,⁶ and yet they press for an answer. With a screeching, relentless voice, conscience accuses, and no one is heard to still the voice of the accuser. And finally — retribution. He sees the corpses of the Israelites strewn in the wilderness. His mind cannot rid itself of the thought of punishment.

Cold logic demands it; unyielding experience shouts out countless instances. God threatens it and says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, ***For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.*** Sin, guilt, punishment! Innumerable sins, damning guilt, and swift punishment.

At this point the person is engulfed in the “*valleys.*” Their thoughts constantly revolve around their sins. They see no righteousness of their own. Neither do they see the righteousness which God has prepared. Lashed by an accusing conscience, a conscience that accuses with boldness on the strength of the Law, such souls move along on the road to despair.

Let nobody make light of the damnableness of this sin. Satan is eager to glorify the despairing sinner with a halo. In the last analysis the self-righteous person and the despairing person meet on common ground: the righteousness of Christ is flouted in each case.

The self-righteous person thinks that his deeds have power to pry open the doors of heaven, but God's curse is his lot as we read in Galatians 3:10, ***For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”***

The person who yields to despair thinks that his sins have the power to shut the doors of heaven. Damnation is his lot also. If they only took heed of Romans 8:1, ¹ *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

Such sins of self-righteousness are the venom of “*vipers*,” its effect is deadly, and they will experience the “*wrath to come*.” Caiaphas and Judas lifted up their eyes in hell.

2. Reduced To Its Simplest Terms, The Preaching Of John Was A Message Of Salvation.

But Paul and Luther were carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. How is this? John tells us. In the British National Gallery there is a painting of “*John in the Wilderness*.”⁷ In the one hand John holds the emblem of the Lamb and in the other a cup of water. That picture portrays a profound understanding of the mission of John.

Our text says, “*all flesh shall see the salvation of God*.” This mission of John, Zacharias had visioned through the Holy Spirit, ⁷ *To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins*.⁸ A new, startlingly different element enters here. In the midst of John’s denunciation of the deeds of men rings out a message of a deed of God.

Salvation implies that there is misery, destruction, and loss. God looked from heaven on the children of men, and He saw filth. God says in Psalm 14:3, ³ *They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, No, not one*. In His sight man is a total loss.

What will God do? Will God fling away worthless man? Will God turn His face from man and permit him to run his godless course to destruction? Will God visit him with swift punishment for his sins?

“*Salvation of God*” means God saves. There is grace, there are depths of grace, which the human intellect will never sound. John came *preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*. The sins of people are there. There is nothing more real. They breathe rebellion against God. And now God

takes action, deliberate, marvellous action. He gathers, as it were, that enormous wallow of human sin and lays it to the account of — Himself, the Son of God.

The Son of God becomes Man. From Bethlehem to Calvary we see Him embattled against sin. Never before had this world of strife witnessed such a struggle. With bated breath we see the unmasking of sin in its most appalling expression in human history. At the cross the anarchy of sin flung itself against the Holy One and completely exhausted itself. Oh, the relief that comes from the cross! God forgives sin.

Did Christ die for my sins? Notice the boundless scope of the message of John, “*for the remission of sins.*” Again, *all flesh shall see the salvation of God.* If it is possible that language can be a vehicle of thought, these words speak of my sin. My sin is forgiven, your sin is forgiven.

And every mountain and hill brought low. The sacrifice of the Son of God for the sins of the world is a fact in the history of the world. The only reliable world’s history tells the wonderful story. People read it. What attitude does mankind take toward it? Christ is rejected by men. They choose another gospel, which is no gospel.

Ever since the days of Cain people have busied themselves erecting altars upon which are placed sacrifices to which the Lord has no respect. Mountains of self-righteousness raise into the clouds. These mountains must be brought low. That is no work that man can do. The mere idea of levelling Mt Everest staggers the imagination. That is work for the almighty God. God Almighty met Saul on the highway to Damascus. Salvation came to Saul.

The hymnist writes,⁹

Thy grace first made me feel my sin,
It taught me to believe;
Then, in believing, peace I found,
And now I live, I live.

Every valley shall be filled. This, again, is work for the almighty God. An enormous amount of soil would be necessary to fill the Grand Canyon. This God provides. There is no disease of the sin-sick soul for which the Gospel does not provide healing balm.

For example the problem of the presence of sin. We read in Isaiah 38:17, ¹⁷ ***Indeed it was for my own peace That I had great bitterness; But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.***

Likewise, the memory of sin,¹⁰ the weakness of sinner,¹¹ the lack of righteousness,¹² the woe of sin,¹³ the enormity of sin,¹⁴ the punishment of sin,¹⁵ and the universal problem of sin.¹⁶ It was God who met Luther with His omnipotent ***“The just shall live by faith.”***¹⁷ Salvation came to Luther.

The salvation of God abides with the child of God. ***The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth.*** The mountains and hills have been brought low, and the valleys have been filled. God has prepared the way, and the King of Glory has entered into the heart of the sinner. Christ now lives in the sinner’s heart and asserts His divine influence.

The road is kept in a state of constant repair. Uneven places are levelled. Sinful habits lose their grip. The thought of doing anything to earn heaven fades away. Self-righteousness does not thrive on the slopes of Calvary. Throes of despair give way to a firm trust in the power of the blood of Christ.

Our text concludes, ***“What shall we do then?”*** ¹¹ ***He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”*** ¹² ***Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”*** ¹³ ***And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”*** ¹⁴ ***Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “And what shall we do?”*** ***So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”***

These examples show that the soul receives spiritual strength from God, a stir of might, and an urging to serve Him.

Let us conclude with the words of the Hymnist,¹⁸

Jesus, master, whose I am,
Purchased Thine alone to be,
By Thy blood, O spotless Lamb,
Shed so willingly for me,
Let my heart be all Thine own,

Let me live to Thee alone. Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 3:1-3

² Luke 1:76

³ John 1:26

⁴ John 3:36

⁵ Rom 1:17

⁶ Job 9:3

⁷ Painted by *Annibale Carracci*

⁸ Luke 1:77

⁹ Hymn 333

¹⁰ Isaiah 43:25

¹¹ Isa. 33:24; 40:31; 42:3

¹² Isa. 45:24

¹³ Isa. 53:4

¹⁴ Isa. 1:18

¹⁵ Isa. 53:5

¹⁶ Isa. 49:6

¹⁷ Romans 1:17

¹⁸ Hymn 376