

"Behold, He Comes to Give Us His Gifts!" John 1:19-28 Advent 4 2022

Dear fellow redeemed...

He's coming; there's no doubt about that. The signs are all pointing toward Christmas Day: all the coloured candles on the Advent wreath are lit and will give way to the light from the Christmas tree in a week; it's cold outside, and there's a little bit of snow on the ground; and we hear from John the Baptist one more time. Today we hear him announce not who he is but rather who he is not. John had been baptizing, and the priests and the priestly order of Levites came to him at the behest of the Pharisees and demanded to know who he thought he was, going out in the wilderness, preaching repentance to and baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins. He is not the Christ nor Elijah nor the Prophet. He was "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (v. 23). He said, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (vv. 26-27). This Jesus, whom John would publicly identify in the verse following our text, would be so great that John considered himself too unworthy to stoop down and tie Jesus' shoes. This Jesus would be so great that John thought Jesus should baptize him instead. This Jesus would be so great that His ministry would increase, and John's would decrease. Jesus was coming, and things were about to change. John himself said, "I indeed baptize

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you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt. 3:11).

Their messages were similar. John the Baptist said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3:2). Jesus the Savior said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). The kingdom of God was at hand, for the King was present—Christ the Lord. Believe in the Gospel: Jesus died to take away your sins. Repent, and confess your sins, that you would receive this great gift Christ would win for you while dying on the cross. John preached to his hearer's repentance and a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins—a baptism in and into the Name of the Coming One. To get these adult converts to their baptism, they had to hear the Word of God and repent of their sins.

To get us to enjoy the fullness of God's gifts that come to us in Baptism, the Word, and the Lord's Supper, we too need to repent. We must confess our sins and confess our Savior to truly treasure His gifts, lest they be little more to us than pearls before swine. To deny the gifts is to deny the Gospel. To deny the gifts is to deny the Giver of the gifts. To deny the gifts is to deny Christ. It is not good for us to receive the body and blood of Christ unworthily, to deny what He promises His

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Sacrament does for us. When we fail to repent of our sins, we are making ourselves no better than the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, and Levites who became smug in their self-righteousness, folks John railed against as a brood of vipers. We don't want to be like them, and we certainly don't want to face eternity in the viper pit of hell. From this preserve us, heavenly Father.

I remember being at my in-laws' for Christmas a few years ago. We visited, we ate, and we opened presents. It was a good day. Some of you have made those visits, while other trips may soon follow. Regardless, when we get together, we look forward to seeing what gifts are left for us under the Christmas tree; so let us look even more forward to the gifts Christ freely gives under the bread and wine, in His Word, and at the font. The Holy Spirit moves our eyes of faith from our focus on the Christmas tree to the tree of the cross, where our Savior gave the greatest gift of all: His very life. He died so that we would live. He was born so that He would die for us. The Babe of Bethlehem would go to the Cross of Calvary and die there to bring about the forgiveness of our sins. He rose on Easter Sunday to give us the gifts He won, giving them to us today in His Word, and also in the Baptism He instituted, for he who believes and is baptized shall be saved. What the Holy Spirit did through Peter's sermon at Pentecost He does each time the Word is preached today: He brings about the forgiveness of sins and salvation.

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[Peter said,] "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." ... Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. [Acts 2:36-39, 41-43]

God grant us this continued spiritual growth in Jesus' Name and for His sake. Amen.