
GOSPEL FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

John 1:19-28

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "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." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

1. The evangelist describes and magnifies the testimony of John with many words. Although it would have been sufficient if he had written about John: "He confessed," he repeats it once again and says, "He did not deny, but confessed" [John 1:20]. Without a doubt he is praising the beautiful steadfastness of John in a great temptation, when he was tempted to commit a great apostasy from the truth. And now consider the particular circumstances.

2. First, those sent to him are not servants or ordinary citizens, but priests and Levites from the highest and noblest class, who were Pharisees, that is to say, the leaders of the people. That was a distinguished embassy to such a common man, who might justly have felt happy and haughty at such an honor, since the favor of lords and princes is highly esteemed in this world.

3. Second, they sent to him not common people, but citizens of Jerusalem (the capital), the Sanhedrin, and the leaders of the Jewish nation. So it was as if the entire people came and did honor to him. What a wind that was and how it would inflate, if it met a vain and worldly heart!

4. Third, they do not offer him a present nor ordinary glory, but the highest glory of all, the kingdom and all authority: they are ready to accept him as the Christ. That is a high and sweet temptation! For if he had not perceived that they wanted to regard him as the Christ, he would not have said,

"I am not the Christ" [John 1:20]. And Luke also writes that, when everybody thought he was the Christ, John spoke: "I am not who you think I am, but I am sent before Him" (cf. Luke 3 [:15-17]).

5. Fourth, when he did not want this honor, they tempted him with another and were ready to take him for Elijah. For they had a prophecy of Malachi, where God says: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrifying day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the ban" (Malachi 4 [:5-6]).

6. Fifth, when he does not want to be Elijah, they tempt him further and offer him the common honor of a prophet, for since Malachi they had not had a prophet. John, however, remains firm and unshaken, though tempted by so much honor knocking at the door.

7. Sixth and last, since they knew no more honors, they let him choose who or as what he wished to be regarded, for they greatly desired to do him honor. But John does not want their honor and answers no more than that he is a voice calling to them and to everybody. This they do not heed. What all this means we shall hear later on. Let us now examine the text.

This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him: "Who are you?" [John 1:19]

8. They sent people to him; why did they not come themselves? John had come to preach repentance to each one of the Jewish people. They did not pay attention to this preaching. It is clear, therefore, that they did not send to him with good and pure intentions, offering him such honor. They also did not believe from their hearts that he was Christ or Elijah or a prophet; otherwise they would have come themselves to be baptized, as did the others. What, then, did they seek of him? Christ explains this: "You sent to John, and he bore witness to the truth. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a short while in his light" (John 5 [:33, 35]). From these words it is clear that they looked for their own honor in John, desiring to make use of his light, that is, of his highly famous name, in order to adorn themselves before the people.

For if John had joined them and accepted the honor they offered, then they also would have become great and glorious before all the people, as being worthy of the friendship and honor of so holy and great a man. But by doing so, would not all their avarice, tyranny, and wickedness have been confirmed as a purely holy and precious thing? Thus John with his holiness would have become the greatest possible cover for their dishonor; and the coming of Christ would justly have been regarded with suspicion, as being

opposed to the doings of the priests and tyrants, with whom John, this great and holy man, would have taken sides.

9. Thus we see what wickedness they practice and how they tempt John to deny Christ and become a Judas Iscariot, in order that he might justify their vice and they might share his honor and popularity. Are they not fine operators, seeking to bring John's honor to themselves? They offer him an apple for a kingdom and would exchange chips for coins. But he remained solid, as follows:

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed: "I am not Christ."
[John 1:20]

10. John's confession has two parts: first, he confesses, and second, he does not deny. His confessing is his confession about Christ, when he says, "I am not the Christ." To this same confession belongs also his confession that he is not Elijah or a prophet [John 1:21]. His not denying is his admission that he says what he is: he is the voice in the wilderness, which with its cry prepares the way of the Lord. Thus his confession is a free confession, which not only confesses what he is not but also what he is. For the part of confession in which someone confesses what he is not is still obscure and incomplete, since one cannot know what is really to be thought of him. But here John openly says what is to be thought of him, and what not; he makes this certain when he confesses that he is not the Christ and does not deny that he is the voice before His coming [John 1:23].

11. Yet someone might say: The evangelist reverses his words in that he calls it a confession when John says that he is not the Christ, which is rather a denial, for he denies that he is the Christ. To say no is to deny, and the Jews wish him to confess that he is the Christ, which he denies; yet the evangelist says that he confessed. And again, it is much more a confession when he says, "I am the voice in the wilderness." But the evangelist considers this matter and describes it as it is before God, and not as the words sound to men. For they are occupied with him denying [to be] Christ and not confessing what he was. But since he remains firm and confesses what he is and is not, his act is a precious confession before God and not a denial.

And they asked him: "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."
[John 1:21]

12. As said above, the Jews had a prophecy that Elijah was to come before the day of the Lord (Malachi 4 [:5]). It is therefore also among Christians a current belief that Elijah is to come before the Last Day. Some add Enoch; others, John the evangelist. So we will say a little bit about this.

13. First, it all depends on whether the prophet Malachi is speaking about the second coming of the Lord on the Last Day or about the first coming in the flesh and through the Gospel. If he is speaking about the Last Day, then we are certainly to expect Elijah, for God does not lie. The coming of Enoch and John, however, has no foundation in Scripture and is therefore to be considered as a fable and tomfoolery. But if he is speaking about Christ's coming in the flesh and through the Word, then no further Elijah is to be expected; rather, John is that same Elijah announced by Malachi.

14. I am of the opinion that Malachi spoke of no other Elijah than John, and that Elijah the Tishbite, who went up to heaven with the chariot of fire (cf. 2 Kings 2 [:11]), is not at all to be expected. I am especially forced to this opinion by the words of the angel Gabriel, who says to John's father, Zechariah: "He will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the unbelievers to the wisdom of the righteous" (Luke 1 [:17]). With these words we see that the angel is pointing to the prophecy of Malachi and cites the same words of the prophet, who also says that Elijah is to turn the hearts of fathers to children, as cited above. If there were another Elijah prophesied about by Malachi, without a doubt the angel would not have pointed to John.

15. Second, the Jews themselves always understood that Malachi was speaking about Christ's coming in the flesh. Therefore, they here ask John whether he is the Elijah who is to come before Christ. But they erred in thinking of the original and bodily Elijah. For though the text requires that Elijah is to come first, it does not require that it be the former Elijah. [Malachi] does not say that Elijah the Tishbite is to come, as Scripture calls him (1 Kings 17 [:1]; 2 Kings 1 [:3, 8]), but merely Elijah, a prophet. The angel Gabriel explains this as "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1 [:17]), as if to say that he will be a true Elijah. In the same way we now say in German of one who is and acts like another that he is truly that other, as when I say: the pope is a true Caiaphas, or John Hus is a true Paul. Thus, through Malachi, God promises one who is to be a true Elijah; but that is John.

16. Nevertheless, I would not believe the interpretation of the Jews alone, if Christ had not confirmed it. When the disciples saw Elijah and Moses on Mount Tabor, they said to the Lord: "Then why do the scribes say that Elijah must come beforehand?" (Matthew 17 [:10]). It is as if they would say, "You have already come, and Elijah did not come before, but only now, after You appeared; and yet they say that he must come before." Christ did not reject this understanding, but rather confirmed it and said: "Elijah shall indeed come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased." Matthew explains: "Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to

them of John the Baptist" (Matthew 17 [:11-13]). Mark adds: "I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him" (Mark 9 [:13]).

17. Now there is no other prophecy concerning Elijah's coming other than this one of Malachi, and Christ applies it to John. And if someone suggests that Christ says, "Elijah shall indeed come, and he will restore all things," it proves nothing, for He Himself explains it in the following words: "But I tell you that Elijah has already come," etc. He means to say: "What you have heard about Elijah, that he comes and will restore all things, is correct and true, for it is so written and it must happen. But they do not know of which Elijah this is said, for he has already come." With these words, therefore, Christ confirms the Scriptures and the interpretation concerning the coming Elijah, but He rejects the false interpretation concerning an Elijah other than John.

18. But Christ most strongly asserts that no other Elijah is coming when He says: "All the prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11 [:13-15]). Here it is made clear that only one Elijah was to come. Had there been another, He would not have said, "John is Elijah who is to come," but He would have had to say, "John is one of the Elijahs," or simply: "He is Elijah." But by calling John that Elijah whom everybody expects, who without a doubt was announced to come, He makes it sufficiently clear that the prophecy of Malachi is fulfilled in John and that after this no other Elijah is to be expected.

19. Therefore, we insist that the last preaching before the Last Day is the Gospel, through which Christ has come into all the world; before this preaching and advent [of Christ], John came and prepared the way. Also all the prophets and the Law prophesy until John; it is not allowed, then, for someone to stretch them beyond John to another Elijah who is yet to come. Thus the prophecy of Malachi must also fit John's time. For because He applies all of the prophets to John's time, He does not let any of them pass him by. And so we conclude with certainty that no other Elijah is to come, but that the Gospel will endure to the end of the world.

"Are you the Prophet?" And he answered: "No." [John 1:21]

20. Here some think that the Jews asked about that prophet of whom Moses writes: "I will raise up a prophet like you from among their brothers," etc. (Deuteronomy 18 [:18]). But Peter (Acts 3 [:22]) and Stephen (Acts 7 [:37]) apply this passage to Christ Himself, which is the correct interpretation. The Jews also certainly identified this prophet, like Moses, as being above Elijah. Therefore, they understood Him to be Christ and asked John

whether he was an ordinary prophet, like the others, since he was neither Christ nor Elijah. For they had had no prophet since the days of Malachi, who was the last and concluded the Old Testament with the above-mentioned prophecy concerning the coming of Elijah. John therefore is the nearest to and first after Malachi, who in finishing his book points to him. Thus they asked whether he was one of the prophets, as also Christ says of him: "What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, one who is also more than a prophet" (Matthew 11 [:9]). And Matthew writes: "They all considered John a prophet" (Matthew 21 [:26]).

21. Now the question arises: How did John confess the truth when he denied that he was Elijah or a prophet, and yet Christ Himself called him Elijah and more than a prophet? Did he not himself know that he had come in the spirit and power of Elijah and that the Scriptures called him Elijah? If someone says that he did not confess himself to be a prophet because he was more than a prophet, that is simply disgraceful, as if he would exalt and praise himself. Therefore, it is to be held that in all simplicity he confessed the truth, namely, that he was not the Elijah about whom they asked nor a prophet. For the prophets commonly led and taught the people, who sought advice and help from them. John was not that kind of prophet and did not want to be, for the Lord was present, and they were to cling to Him and follow Him. Thus he did not want to draw the people to himself, but to lead them to Christ, as it must necessarily happen until Christ Himself came.

[John said this] also because a prophet foretells the coming of Christ, but John shows the present [Christ], which is different from the prophet's task. In the same way a priest in the bishop's presence points the people away from himself to the bishop, saying, "I am not the priest; he is your priest"; but in the bishop's absence he rules the people as the bishop.

22. Thus John points the people away from himself to Christ. And though this is a higher and greater office than that of a prophet, yet it is not so on account of his merit but on account of the presence of his Lord. Praising John as being more than a prophet does not announce his own worthiness but that of his Lord, who is present. For it is customary that a servant is greater, more worthy, and more honorable in the absence of his master than in his presence.

23. Thus the rank of a prophet is higher than that of John, though his office is greater and more immediate. For a prophet rules and leads the people, and they adhere to him; but John does no more than point them away from himself to Christ, the present Lord. Therefore, in genuine simplicity he denied being a prophet, though abounding in all the qualities of a prophet. He did all this for the sake of the people, in order that they might not accept his testimony as the promise of a prophet and expect Christ still to

be coming at another time, but that they might recognize him as a forerunner and guide, and follow his guidance to the Lord, who was present. That is what the following words say:

So they said to him: "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am a voice crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." [John 1:22-23]

24. This is the second part of his confession, in which he declares what he is, after having denied that he was Christ or Elijah or a prophet. It is as though he were to say: "Your salvation is much too near for a prophet to be required. Do not stretch your eyes so far out into the future, for the Lord of all the prophets is Himself here, so that no prophet is needed.

"The Lord is coming this way, whose forerunner I am; He is treading on my heels. I am not prophesying of Him as a prophet, but crying as a forerunner to make space and room for Him so that He may enter. I do not say, 'See, He is coming,' as the prophets did; but I say, 'See, He comes and is here.' I do not speak words about Him but point to Him with my finger. This is what Isaiah proclaimed long ago, that such a crying to make room for the Lord should go before Him. That is who I am, and not a prophet. Therefore, step aside and make room; permit the Lord Himself to be present and walk among you, and do not look for any more prophecies about Him."

25. Now this is an answer which no learned, wise, and holy man can endure, and John must literally be possessed of the devil and be a heretic. Only sinners and fools think him a holy, godly man; give way to his crying; and make room for the Lord, removing the obstacles from His way. The others, however, throw logs, stones, and dirt in His way; they even kill both the forerunner and the Lord Himself for daring to say such things to them. Why? John tells them to prepare the way of the Lord. That is to say, they do not have the Lord nor His way in them. What do they have then? Where the Lord is not, nor His way, there must be man's own way, the devil, and all that is evil. Judge, then, whether those holy, wise people are not justly angry at John, condemn his word, and finally slaughter both him and his Master! Should he be so bold as to consign such holy people over to the devil and label all their doings as false, wicked, and damnable, claiming that their ways are not the Lord's ways, that they must first of all prepare the Lord's ways, and that they have lived all their holy lives in vain?

26. Moreover, if he secretly wrote it on a tablet, they might perhaps have patience with that. But he gives voice to it; and not only a voice, but he cries it aloud; and not in a corner either, but openly under the sky, in the wilderness, before all the world; and publicly, before all people, he makes these saints

into sinners and a disgrace with all their doings, so that no one is deceived by their pretense. Thus they lose all the honor and profit which their holy life formerly brought them. That is not to be endured by such holy people, but for the sake of God and justice they must condemn that false doctrine, in order that the poor people may not be misled or the service of God corrupted; and for the love and service of God the Father, they will have to kill John and his Master.

27. This, then, is the preparation of Christ's way and John's proper office. He is to humble all the world and proclaim that they are all sinners—lost, damned, poor, needy, miserable people; that there is no life, work, or estate (however holy, beautiful, and good it may appear) that is not damnable unless Christ our Lord dwells therein, unless he works, walks, lives, is, and does everything through faith in Him; that they all need Christ and should desire to share His grace.

See, where it is preached that all people's work and life is nothing, that is the true voice of John in the wilderness and the pure and clear truth of Christian doctrine, as Paul says, "They are all sinners and lack the glory that they should have had toward God" (Romans 3 [:23]). This is truly humbling and cutting out and destroying overconfidence. That is truly to prepare the way of the Lord, to give room, and to make way.

28. Now here are found two kinds of people: some believe the crying of John and confess that it is true for them. These are the people to whom the Lord comes. In them His way is prepared and made ready, as Peter says that God "gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5 [:5]). The Lord Himself says, "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18 [:14]). Here you must learn well and understand spiritually what the way of the Lord is, how it is prepared, and what prevents Him from finding room in us. The way of the Lord, as you have heard, is that He does all things within us, so that all our works are not ours but His, which happens by faith.

29. But the preparation does not consist in you making yourself worthy by praying, fasting, mortifying yourself, and your own works, as now all preaching during Advent foolishly urges. Rather, as has been said, it is a spiritual preparation, consisting in a thoroughgoing knowledge and confession of your being unfit, a sinner, poor, damned, and miserable, with all the works you can do. The more a heart is thus minded, the better it prepares the way of the Lord, even if meanwhile it drinks nothing but malmsey, walks on roses, and does not pray a word.

30. The hindrance, however, which does not give way for the Lord is not only the coarse, bodily sins of unchastity, wrath, haughtiness, avarice, etc., but rather also spiritual opinion and pharisaical pride, which thinks highly of its own good life and works, feels secure, does not itself condemn them,

and in addition refuses to let them be condemned. Such, then, is the other class of men, namely, those who do not believe John's voice but say it is of the devil, since it forbids good works and condemns the service of God. These are the people to whom most of all and most urgently it is said, "Prepare the way of the Lord," and who least of all accept it.

31. Therefore, John speaks to them with cutting words: "You brood of vipers! Who taught you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits of repentance that are genuine" (Luke 3 [:7-8]). But, as said above, the more people are urged to prepare the Lord's way, the more they obstruct it and the more unreasonable they become. They will not be told that their doings are not the Lord's until they, to the glory and honor of God, destroy the truth and the word of John, with him and his Lord as well.

32. Now see whether it was not a great confession of John when he dared to open his mouth and freely say that he was not Christ, but a voice to which they did not like to listen, chiding the great teachers and leaders of the people because their doings are not right and not the Lord's. And as it went with John, so it still goes, from the beginning of the world to the end. For such proud holiness cannot hear that it must first prepare the way for the Lord, since it thinks it sits in God's lap and lets itself be flattered that it has long ago finished the way, before God even thought of seeking a way into them—those precious saints! The pope and his followers have also condemned John's voice: "Prepare the way of the Lord." In short, it is an intolerable voice—except to poor sinners and troubled consciences, in whose hearts it is pleasant.

33. But is it not a wrong and strange way of speaking when he says, "I am the voice of one crying"? How can a man be a voice? He ought to have said, "I am one crying with a voice"! But that is speaking according to the manner of the Scriptures. God told Moses: Aaron "shall be your mouth" (Exodus 4 [:16]); that is, he will speak for you. Job says, "I was an eye to the blind and a foot to the lame" (Job 29 [:15]). Similarly, we say in German about a miser that gold is his heart, and money is his life.

So here "I am the voice of one crying" means: "I am one who cries and have received my name from my work. Just as Aaron is called a mouth because of his eloquence, I am a voice because of my crying." And that which in Hebrew reads "the voice of one crying" would be translated into Latin and German as "a crying voice." In the same way, Paul speaks of "the poor of the saints" instead of "the poor saints" (Romans 15 [:26]), and of "the mystery of godliness" instead of "the godly mystery" (1 Timothy 3 [:16]). Just as when I say "the language of the Germans," I would say better "the German language." So here "a voice of one crying" means "a crying voice." The Hebrew tongue speaks this way much more.

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(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him: "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor a prophet?" John answered them: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He who comes after me, who was before Me, the strap of whose shoe I am not worthy to untie." [John 1:24-27]

34. It seems as though the evangelist omits something in these words and that the complete words would be: "I baptize with water, but among you stands one who baptizes with fire," just as Luke has: "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with fire" (Luke 3 [:16]); and again: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1 [:5]). But, though he here is silent about this other Baptism, he sufficiently indicates that there is to be another Baptism, since he speaks of another who is coming after him and who without a doubt will not baptize with water.

35. Now begins the second onset, whereby John was tempted on the left side. For since they could not move him with the enticement [of honor], they attack him with threats. And here their false humility breaks out and reveals that it is sheer pride. They would also have done that if John had followed them, after they had had enough of him. Therefore, learn here to be on your guard against men, particularly when they act friendly and gently; as Christ says: "Beware of men. Be wise as serpents and without falsehood like doves" (Matthew 10 [:17, 16]). That is to say: Do not trust those who are gentle, and do no evil to your enemies.

36. See, these Pharisees, who professed their willingness to accept John as the Christ, when things didn't happen as they desired, turn and censure John's Baptism. It is as if they would say: "Since you are not Christ nor Elijah nor a prophet, you should know that we are your superiors according to the Law of Moses, and you therefore must conduct yourself as our subordinate. You are not to act independently, without our command, knowledge, and permission. Who has given you the right to introduce something new among our people with your baptizing? You will get into trouble with your wickedness and disobedience."

37. John, however, just as he had despised their hypocrisy, so he despises their threats, remains firm, and confesses Christ as before. Moreover, he rudely attacks them and charges them with ignorance, saying, as it were: "I do not baptize with water because of your command, for nothing depends on that. There is another present from whom I have a command; you do not know Him, but He is more than enough for me. If you did know Him or wanted to know Him, you would not ask about my right to baptize, but you would come to be baptized yourselves. For He is so much greater that I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandal."

38. John's words "He is the one who comes after me, who was before me," three times quoted by the evangelist in this chapter [John 1:15, 30], have been misinterpreted and obscured by some who referred them to Christ's divine and eternal birth, as though John meant to say that Christ had been born before him in eternity. But what is remarkable about the fact that He was born before John in eternity, since He was also born before the world and all things? Thus He was also to come not only after [John] but also after all things, since He is the first and the last (cf. Revelation 1 [:17]). Therefore, both His future and His past agree. But John's words are clear and simple and speak about Christ when He already was a man. The words "He will come after me" cannot be taken to mean that He would be born after him, since John at the time he spoke was about thirty years old, as also Christ was.

39. Thus the understanding is certainly that he is speaking these words about the preaching office, with the meaning: "I have come, that is, I have begun to preach, but I shall soon stop, and another will come and preach after me." Thus Luke writes that Christ began "from the Baptism of John" (Acts 1 [:22]) and "Jesus was thirty years of age when He began" (Luke 3 [:23]). "Are you the one who is to come" (Matthew 11 [:3]), that is, the one who will begin to preach? For Christ's ministry began first after His Baptism, when His Father glorified Him and testified about Him [cf. Matt. 3:17]. Even the New Testament and the time of grace did not begin at the birth of Christ, as He Himself says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come" (Mark 1 [:15]). For if He had not begun to preach, His birth would have been of no use; but when He did begin to act and to teach, then also began all prophecies, all Scripture, a new light, and a new world.

40. So we have what he means by saying, "He will come after me." But it is not yet clear what the words mean: "He has been before me; He was before me," which they refer to His eternal birth. We maintain in all simplicity that those words were spoken about the preaching office, with the meaning: "Although He is not yet preaching, but is first coming after me, and I am preaching before Him, nevertheless He is already at hand, and so close by, that before I began to preach He has already been there and has been appointed to preach." The words "before me" therefore point to John's office, and not to his person. Thus: "He is before me, that is, before my preaching and Baptism, namely, for about thirty years; but He had not yet come and had not yet begun." John thereby indicates his office, that he is not a prophet foretelling the coming of Christ, but one who precedes Him who is already present, who is so near that He has already been in existence so many years before His beginning and coming.

41. Therefore, he also says, "Among you stands one you do not know." He means to say: "Do not let your eyes look into future times. He of whom the

prophets speak has been among you in the Jewish nation for about thirty years. Take care and do not miss Him. You do not know Him; therefore, I have come to point Him out to you." The words "among you stands one" are spoken after the manner of the Scriptures, which say: A prophet will arise or stand up. Jesus says, "False prophets shall arise" (Matthew 24 [:24]), or stand up or spring up. And God says, "I will raise up a prophet from among their brothers" (Deuteronomy 18 [:18]). John wants to show that this raising, rising up, standing up, and waking was fulfilled in Christ. He has already come forward from among their brothers, as God had promised, and they did not know Him.

42. This, then, is the second office of John and of an evangelical preacher: that he not only makes all the world sinners, as we have heard above, but also gives comfort and shows how we may get rid of our sins. He does that by pointing to the one who is to come. Thus he points us to Christ, who is to redeem us from our sins when we receive Him in true faith. The first office says, "You are all sinners and lack the way of the Lord." When we believe this, the other office follows and says: "Look to and receive Christ. Believe in Him; He will free you of your sins." If we believe this, we have it. We will say more of this later.

These things took place in Bethabara¹ across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. [John 1:28]

43. The evangelist John describes this testimony so carefully that he even mentions the place where it happened. The confession of Christ is greatly dependent on the testimony, and there are many offenses in the way. Undoubtedly, however, he wished to allude to some spiritual mystery of which we shall now speak.

THE SECRET MEANING OF THIS GOSPEL READING

44. This is the sum of it: This Gospel reading depicts the preaching office of the New Testament, what it is, what it does, and what happens to it.

45. First, it is the voice of one calling, not a piece of writing. The Law and the Old Testament are dead writings, put into books, but the Gospel is to be a living voice. Therefore, John is a figure and an image and also an author, the first of all preachers of the Gospel. He writes nothing but calls out everything with his living voice.

46. Second, the Old Testament or the Law was preached among the tents at Mount Sinai to the Jews alone. But John's voice is heard in the wilderness, freely and openly, under the heavens, before all the world.

¹ Luther's reading follows the *Textus Receptus*, which has "Bethabara" instead of "Bethany" (Desiderius Erasmus, ed., *Novum Instrumentum omne* [Basel: Johannes Froben, 1516], p. 193).

47. Third, it is a calling, clear, and loud voice, that is, one that speaks confidently and fearlessly and fears no one, neither death, hell, life, world, devil, men, honor, disgrace, or any creature. Thus Isaiah says: "A voice says, 'Preach!' And I said, 'What shall I preach?' All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever." Again: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, preacher; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, preacher; lift it up, fear not" (Isaiah 40 [:6-9]). The world cannot endure the Gospel; therefore, there must be a strength which despises it and can cry out against it fearlessly.

48. Fourth, John's clothes are of camel's hair, and he has a leather belt (Matthew 3 [:4]). Although this signifies the strict and chaste life of preachers, it above all signifies the nature of the preaching or of the Gospel. It is a voice, but not embellished with soft clothes; it does not dissemble or flatter. It is a preaching about the cross—a hard, rough, sharp speech for the old man—and it girds the loins for spiritual and bodily chastity. This is taken from the life and words of the dead patriarchs, who like camels have borne the burden of the Law and of the cross. He ate wild birds [*sic*] and wild honey—not the wild birds of this land, but there were other animals in that land. This means those who receive the Gospel, namely, the humble sinners, who take the Gospel to themselves and in themselves.

49. Fifth, John is on the other side of the Jordan. "Jordan" means the Holy Scriptures, which have two sides. The left side is the bodily understanding, which the Jews have. John is not there, for that [understanding] does not produce sinners, but saints, arrogant about their works. The right side is the true spiritual understanding, which rejects and kills all works in order that faith alone may remain in all humility. The Gospel brings this [understanding], as Paul does when he says, "The Scripture concludes that they are all sinners" (Romans 3 [cf. Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:22]).

50. Sixth, here begins the dispute between true and false preachers. The Pharisees cannot endure John's voice, they despise his teaching and Baptism and remain obdurate in their doings and teachings. But on account of the people they pretend to think highly of him. But because he does not want what they want, he must be possessed of the devil, and finally he must be beheaded by Herod.

So it is now, and so it has always been. No false teacher wants people to say that he preaches without or against the Gospel, but, on the contrary, that he thinks highly of it and believes in it. Nevertheless, he does violence to it, making it conform to his meaning. This the Gospel cannot permit, for it stands firm and never lies. Then [the Gospel] is reviled as heresy and error, as the doctrine of devils, until they do violence to it and forbid it and cut off

its head so that it may nowhere be preached or heard. This was done by the pope in the case of John Hus.

51. Thus he is a truly Christian preacher who preaches nothing but that which John proclaimed, and firmly insists upon it. First, he must preach the Law so that the people may learn what great things God demands of us, which we cannot do because of the powerlessness of our nature which has been corrupted by Adam's fall, and thus baptize with the Jordan. The cold water means the teaching of the Law, which does not kindle love, but rather extinguishes it. For through the Law man learns how difficult and impossible the Law is. Then he becomes hostile to it, and his love for it cools; he feels that he hates the Law from the bottom of his heart. That is then a grievous sin, to be hostile to God's commands.

Then man must humble himself and confess that he is lost and that all his works are sins along with his whole life. Then John's Baptism has been accomplished, and he has been not only sprinkled but also baptized. Then he sees why John says, "Repent." He understands that John is right and that everyone must mend his ways, or repent. But Pharisees and those holy in their own works do not arrive at this understanding, nor do they permit themselves to be baptized. They think that they do not need repentance, and therefore John's words and Baptism are foolishness in their eyes.

52. Second, when the first teaching of the Law and Baptism are over, and man, humbled by the knowledge of himself, must despair of himself and his powers, then begins the second part of the teaching, in which John points the people away from himself to Christ and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes on Himself the sin of the world!" [John 1:29]. By this he means to say: "First, I have by my teaching made you all sinners, condemned all your works, and told you to despair of yourselves. But in order that you may not also despair of God, I will show you how to get rid of your sins—not that you can take off your sins or make yourselves godly through your works; another man is needed for this. I cannot do it, but I can point Him out. It is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. He—He, and no one else either in heaven or on earth—takes our sins on Himself. You yourself could not pay for the very smallest of sins. He alone must take on Himself not only your sins but also the sins of the world, and not just some sins of the world but all the sins of the world, be they great or small, many or few." This, then, is preaching and hearing the pure Gospel and recognizing the finger of John, who points out to you Christ, the Lamb of God.

53. Now, if you can believe that this voice of John is true, and if you can follow his finger and recognize the Lamb of God carrying your sin, then you have gained the victory, then you are a Christian, a master of sin, death, hell, and all things. Then your conscience will rejoice and become heartily fond

of this gentle Lamb of God. Then will you love, praise, and give thanks to our heavenly Father for this unfathomable wealth of His mercy, preached by John and given in Christ. You will become willing to do His divine will, as best you can, with all your strength. For what more comforting and delightful message can be heard than that our sins are not ours anymore, that they no more lie on us, but on the Lamb of God? How can sin condemn such an innocent Lamb? [Sin] must be vanquished and blotted out by Him, and likewise death and hell (the reward of sin) must also be vanquished. See what God our Father has given us in Christ!

54. Take care, therefore; take care, lest you presume to get rid of the smallest of your sins through your own merit before God, and lest you take the title away from Christ, the Lamb of God. John testifies and says, "Mend your ways, or repent." But he does not mean for us to mend our ways and to take off our sins by ourselves. He declares this powerfully by adding: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" As we have said above, he means that each one is to know himself and his need for correction; yet he is not to look for this in himself, but in Jesus Christ alone.

Now may God our Father, according to His mercy, help us come to this knowledge of Christ, and may He send into the world the voice of John, with many evangelists! Amen.