

Rorate Coeli
23 December, Anno Domini 2018
St. John 1:19-28
Pastor Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is certainly an important lesson to be learned from John the Baptizer - know thyself. He could have perpetrated the greatest act of identity theft in history because people were ready for a Messiah. The pump was primed. The Jews were suffering under pagan Roman rule and there hadn't been a prophet in over 400 years. It was time and John was playing the part.

But for all the praise and lofty titles that had been heaped on him John was still very cognizant of the fact that he was no Christ, no Savior. He knew that he needed saving as much as the people whom he baptized for repentance. People wanted a Messiah, a deliverer, but from things that didn't really matter. It was the forerunner's job to show them what really ailed them. To cut deep into their hearts and expose the cancerous sin that was consuming them. John's questioners didn't know themselves. They liked the show John was putting on - the crazy clothes, the odd diet, the life in the wilderness. They didn't even mind his preaching. But John was nothing more to them, really just a freak show, something to break up the monotony of life, something to get excited about for a little while until something better came along.

That's the way it is with most preaching of repentance. It sounds nice in theory. Wouldn't it be great if people actually did stop sinning but come on, really? You don't really expect us to turn away from our sin do you? That would be hard. People will find us a little weird if we actually seek first the things of God and his righteousness. We loves calls to repentance as long as they aren't directed at us. We may even be okay with saying sorry for our sins but don't expect us to do anything differently next time. You can't really expect us to start loving our neighbor, to start choosing the important things over the fun, popular, comfortable things.

John makes us uncomfortable because he isn't interested in gray lines. Because God doesn't, John has no use for excuses or justifications for our anger, our biting comments, our half-hearted desire to actually put away our sin, our Cirque du Sole -esque attempts to make living like the godless world look a little more godly. The preaching of John is absolute. The demands the Law places on you are truly all-or-nothing. You can't steal - ever in any way. There is absolutely no way to long after the girl in the commercials in a healthy way. There is never ever a valid reason to damage the reputation of your neighbor. It is not loving God if it isn't with every fiber of your being. There is no close enough.

We want something a little more tolerable, a little less demanding. We want religion to be vague and tolerant of other possibilities. We want a God who doesn't really have any expectations of us other than to try to be happy and to be nice to others. We want a God who doesn't mind being set on the same stage with Buddha or Allah or America or ourselves.

What really makes us uncomfortable about John is that he forces us to see the truth about ourselves and the world we live in. He shows us that our lives are complete train-wrecks. He

pulls off the mask of happiness that we try to put on for the holidays and exposes the very broken family that we live in. He reminds us that we live among drug addicts, unbelievers, adulterers, and liars. And then, to top it off, he rips the band-aid off the rest of the way and shows us that we're the addicts, the unbelievers, the adulterers, the liars. He reminds us why we have to gather together around the caskets of loved ones and stand out in the cold and the rain to lay them to rest.

Repent. Listen to John's preaching. Don't get defensive. Don't turn away. I'll grant you that it's nothing pretty to look at. It hurts. It may even make you angry. But it is the truth. Your life isn't fine. You aren't okay. You don't have it together. Your family is a mess. Your heart is filled with all kinds of wickedness and things that God hates. You have hurt others and you have been hurt by others. You are afraid. You are plagued by doubts and worries. You are still a hurting, fumbling sinner in need of a Savior. John knew that. He knew it was true of your life because he knew it was true of his own. He certainly wasn't the Christ.

But he knew the one who was. He made no qualms about calling sin sin because he was absolutely confident about who it was who had come to take away those sins. Standing in the Jordan, John had seen the Spirit descend and rest upon Jesus. He had heard the Father proclaim Jesus to be the beloved Son. John exposed sin because only sinners need Jesus and Jesus only came for sinners. Are you a sinner? Can you, will you confess, and not deny, but confess with your heart as well as your lips "I am a poor, miserable sinner. There is nothing good in me no matter what kind of glossy cover I try to present on the outside?"

If so, rejoice! Because it is sinners, and not those who try to comfort themselves with their own goodness and righteousness, who have hope. The one whose first house was full of filth and stench and blood, was anointed as the spotless Lamb of atonement upon whom the filth and stench and guilty blood of the world, including yours and mine, were laid. God washes away sins and gives new life, new hope, new strength, new powers to those who unabashedly confess their sins and the darkness of their hearts and seek after God's mercy where He has placed it to be found – in the water, in the Word, in the bread and in the wine. He has placed these means right out in the open as pledges and seals of His mercy, His love, and His forgiveness.

As great as John was, he wasn't Jesus. He wasn't the one who would suffer judgment for you. He isn't the one who made peace between you and God by his cross. Behold, the Lamb of God who has taken away your sin. Your Lord and Savior is at hand this very day to forgive you, to show you that death has been overcome and cannot harm any who fall asleep in him, to give you peace and strength to overcome temptation and endure the hardships and struggles of this life.

Behold, the true and only Christ, the Lamb of God, Jesus - for you.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.