

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

John 1:19-28

Make straight the way!

“Make straight the way.” Where has the path become crooked? Where has it sunk low? Where have obstacles arisen? Where has the pavement produced potholes and cracks?

“Make straight the way.” Yet how difficult isn't it for Him to enter into our lives? He comes to the world and is relegated to the barn. He comes to us and is relegated to every other Sunday and a dusty spot on the coffee table. Why? We know who He is. We know what He has done. We know why He has done it. At least, most of us know these things, which exponentially increases our guilt. Why do we make the path so difficult?

“Make straight the way.” But how is the Lord to enter where lust has made its bed? How is the Lord to reign where self is king? How is the Lord to love where hate abides? How is the Lord to be enthroned where greed is seated? How is the Lord to speak when our tongues are ceaseless with gossip and coarse language? How is the Lord to have His home in a temple that crumbles from neglect?

“Make straight the way.” John's words roll off the tongue and are simple enough for a child to grasp, yet he commands what we have not done and will not do. We are crooked sinners. We sin and call it virtue. We sin and call it a mistake. We sin and call it how God made us. We sin and call it unrealistic. We sin and call it unavoidable. We sin and call it our neighbor's fault. We sin and claim sin has not made us sinners, that we are still good people. We sin and have forgotten how to blush, too lazy or brazen to even hide our shame. *“Make straight the way.”* But we are roads beyond repair.

“Who are you?” Who are you to say such things? Who are you to call the kettle black? Who are you to speak for God? Who are you to decide what is true? Who are you to claim chastisement is love? Who are you to call me crooked? Who are you to accuse or forgive? The crooked road knows a crooked road. *“Who are you, John?”* I am the one called to call out, not because of who I am, but because of who is coming, and should you refuse to listen, you will be judged, not for rejecting me, but for rejecting the One for whom I herald.

“I am a voice.” We listen to voices. We don't look at them. We listen to them. So listen. When someone calls fire, we do not ask if he is fat or thin, rich or poor, extrovert or introvert, fashionable or uncouth, old or young, blond or brunette, tall or short, Jew or Gentile. When someone calls fire, we run, because we do not want to be scorched. “Fire!” John calls. What do you care who he is? Fire!

“A preacher in the wilderness.” Why? That's where preachers end up. Few listen. Off to the wilderness. But the speed of sound is the same regardless, and you to

the wilderness you have come, to the backwards, to the strange, to the unpopular, in other words, to the church. What does it matter what the masses think? If the masses are stubborn as a mule, should you too be stubborn? Should the masses lose their hearing, does deafness become a blessing, a virtue? John is a “*preacher in the wilderness,*” but he is your preacher today, so listen.

“*Why then do you baptize?*” The Church knows the question well. God’s grace gets lost in the messenger or the means. We’ve answered the “*Who are you?*” Let’s get to the “*Why then?*” Why baptize? Water is water. Why should the Lord have to use water, and simple water at that, from the same faucet that fills our glasses and rinses our hands? He doesn’t have to. He wants to, and that’s that. Why should God love you, seek you, be born and die for you? He wants to, and that’s that. God didn’t ask your opinion, so don’t bother giving it. He’s God and you’re you. Should He tell you to eat straw and call it macaroni, might as well grab some cheese. “*Why then do you baptize?*” Sin must be washed away. Do you have sin? Then stop asking questions and get in the water.

“*The One whom you do not know.*” Back to the beginning again. “*Make straight the way.*” Why? “*Make straight the way of the Lord.*” The Lord is coming. God is coming. Someone greater is on the way. John is but a finger, a trumpet, a megaphone to get you ready. You do not know Him fully, but you will. But how will you know Him? Will you know Him as a Lover spurned or as a Rescuer, as the Bridegroom? He comes to love all, to save all, to redeem all, to bring all with Him to His home in heaven, but not all will come. Will you come? Are you ready? Is the path straight? Have you trekked out to the wilderness to hear the voice, looked past the appearance and filled your ear with the message? The One is coming. Will you be ready?

You’re no Hilton. You’re no Holiday Inn. You aren’t even a Super 8. But you can be a manger. The manger doesn’t court the Savior. The manger doesn’t have billboards or slogans, stationary or neon signs. The manger is not where Christ makes reservations, but where He is laid when the world will not have Him. You can be the manger. But that is not bad news. That is the heart and core of the Good News. You are the bed, not that seeks your Savior, but that our Savior seeks, for which He pines. You are the place over which His star shines.

Embrace the wilderness of faith. Chase away the “*Who are you?*” of friends, relatives, and conscience with the “*He is He*” of the gospel. If He opens your mouth, who are you to be quiet? If He opens the doors of your heart, who are you to shut them? You are not the Christ, but you are His manger. What could be more amazing than that? Amen.