

John 1.19-28

Rorate Coeli

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St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Oremus: Lord God, heavenly Father, according to the Word of Your servant, John, I would make straight for Your Son Jesus Christ the way to my heart. But because of the corruption of my nature I am helpless and unable to free myself from my sins and iniquities, from my death and hell. I therefore pray You, send Your Holy Spirit to lift my earthbound heart to Christ, my Sun, and so join Him to me through faith that I may never be lost; through the same, Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Make straight the way!

That's the Baptist's cry on the banks of the Jordan. The Lord is coming. Just as He came to Earth in the womb of His blessed mother and made it His home and sanctified it by His presence, so does He wish to come to your heart and make it His home and sanctify it by His presence. To set your heart—and you—aside for its proper purpose, to live with Him eternally. To set you apart from all sins and death and give you instead His righteousness and life. To exchange the gloom of a worm-filled grave with the radiance of His empty grave.

Yes. The Lord is coming. And that's what He wants to do. So make straight the way.

Ah. But as soon I say that ... dread must set in.

For the way He wishes to be prepared into your heart is strewn with the potholes of your iniquity, the fallen logs of your transgressions, crumbled pavement of your trespasses. And there's nothing you can do about it. Clear that log, and another comes crashing down. Fill one pothole here, there another forms; repave this block, and the next is already crumbling. For the way to your heart is laid upon the failed roadbed of the sin you inherited from Adam.

And yet that's what John says. Get to work. Fill the potholes of your iniquity with your cold patch. Get out the chain saw and cut up and remove the logs of your transgressions. Lay a new pavement—smooth with good works, a righteous life, love toward God and love toward neighbor. But above all, fix the failed roadbed. Put your flesh to death.

Don't just not get yourself dragged into internet porn, don't even look at someone fully clothed ... and wonder.

Don't just not stick a verbal knife in your brother's back, don't even cast a furtive smirk to someone else at his foolish behavior.

Don't just not give the partial truth as the full truth, but make yourself so honest that your yes is yes and your no is no.

Don't just use an apparent piety to mask a deep apathy toward God and His Word, but tear down the idol you've erected of yourself and set up Christ and Christ alone in your heart.

That's what it means to make straight the way.

As soon as you get to work on that project you realize it's like building the Dalton Highway. 414 miles straight across the mountains and boreal forests and tundra of Alaska. From Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay. All by yourself. You couldn't do it in 1,000 lifetimes. 10,000 years in Purgatory itself—if there were such a thing—couldn't bring it about. You'd sink under the toil of your 1,000 lives, and hate the God who'd sentenced you to 10,000 years in Purgatory.

But it would be then that you'd spot your problem. Maybe you've already spotted it.

Underneath all of this—under all these potholes and crumbled pavement, under these logs and failing roadbed of sin—is nothing but sheer, trembling fear of God. And this craven fear of God is like a huge rock thrown into a pond, displacing all the water in its path, leaving a vacuum where love and trust in God should be. That's your sin.

The crumbling pavement and the logs and potholes—they're an issue. But they aren't the real issue. What the roadbed is made out of is. It's pea gravel. It always gives out. It always either despairs of God or ignores Him like someone ignores the symptoms of cancer. And so the potholes will continue to form, the road will crumble, the trees crowding the roadbed will continue to drop their branches. And 1,000 lifetimes and 10,000 years in Purgatory—if it existed—wouldn't make things better, but worse, pulverizing that gravel into ever greater piles of despair and apathy toward God. And you find yourself utterly helpless.

That's the situation John the Baptist found himself in, too. Entirely unworthy even to untie the sandals of the Lord, much less receive Him as Guest in his heart. His picture of God was no different from yours. He knew the futility of the life God had consigned him to. He knew that his every breath wasn't just one more breath, but a subtraction from the total breaths he'd ever take. And he knew there was nothing he could do about it except rage against the God who had made him that way.

But now for John through His Christ the Lord had opened His own heart to show John what was in it. Run around the house of God's heart and look through all the windows if you can. Apart from Jesus all you get is nothing but blackout curtains. And nothing to be seen. And all you can imagine is how He's shut you out. How you have no place in His heart. How little He must think of you, and how little He cares.

But Jesus comes as another kind of window. He's the kind of window that lets you see where no one has ever seen so that He says, "Philip, have you been with Me so long and still do not know Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father." He's the kind of window makes what is unknown known so that John can write, "No one has seen God before; the Only-Begotten, who is in the lap of the Father, This One has made Him known." He's the kind of window that unites who He is with who the Father is so that He can say, "I and the Father are one." Jesus is the kind of window into the heart of the Father whose very existence says God doesn't hate the world He created, but loves it. And not in some anemic, notional, emotional way. But in such a way that His love bursts forth in concrete action: He gave His Son that whosoever believes in Him—just believes in Him!—may not perish but have everlasting life.

You see, this is where and when the correction of the road happens.

When? It happens when you've found yourself helpless against sin and death, against the devil who constantly hounds you and the hell you know you have coming. It happens when you've come to realize you can't escape the flesh you wear, but are only made worse by it.

Where? It happens at that point where Christ Himself comes—in His Word, in His Baptism, in His Supper. Who is the victor over sin and death. Who came to trample Satan under His feet and take a victory lap around hell. Who came to bear the flesh you wear and to be tempted in every way as you are but without sin. And all of it not for Himself, but for you. And by His holy life, by His innocent death, by His glorious resurrection from to rip open the merciful, pity-filled, compassionate, gracious, patient, loving heart of the Father toward you.

So just one final word about faith. That "when and where" we just talked about is precisely the time and place that saving faith is conceived in the heart. The heart made cold and numb and brought to despair by the constant drumbeat of "do-more-do-better" as it scrapes the wreckage of its life to flee sin and death collapses. And Christ comes along with the warmth of the Gospel and massages that heart back to life and it becomes a living, beating thing that lives off nothing but Christ alone. And there Christ so joins Himself to believing Christian that all that He is and has becomes the possession of the believer. The Father's pleasure in His own Son—that's the pleasure the believer is held in by the Father. The death of all sins on Christ's cross—that cross and all its fruit is made the believer's cross and fruit. The empty grave—that's the grave the believer will inhabit. A road crooked with sin and death made straight by the holiness and life of God's Son.

What a thing that is!

Oremus: Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart that it may be a quiet chamber kept for Thee. Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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