

Congregation, this evening we will reflect on the Scripture passage that was read to you, John 1:19–28. I will read two of those verses again, verses 26 and 27:

26 John answered them, saying, I baptise with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

27 He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

The theme for this morning is: **The Friend of the Bridegroom**

Boys and girls, the friend of the Bridegroom is John the Baptist.

There are two main points, or rather two questions:

Who is he?

What does he say?

So first:

1. Who is he, this friend of the Bridegroom?

There is a great deal of activity in Bethabara. There is some discussion about exactly where this place was located. It was probably somewhere along the Jordan River, north of the Dead Sea, in the direction of Galilee.

It is bustling with people. They are coming from far and wide. Mark writes:

And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:5)

People are confessing their sins and being baptized.

But this does not sit well with the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, and the chief priests. This man is preaching, yet he does not align himself with them. What's more, he calls even us—pious and religious Jews—to repentance. And that stings.

It is still the same today.

Who needs to repent? Atheists? Agnostics? People outside the church? Those who have drifted away? Former church members?

No, says John.

Church people, repent! You!

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him:

O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father:

(we belong to the church, to the Reformed Congregation), for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? (Luke 3:7–10)

And what is his answer?

Repent!

And congregation, that is still the message that is proclaimed today:

Church people, members of the Reformed Congregation of Carterton, young and old:

Repent!

You say, "God must do that! I must be converted."

Congregation, I am certain that if John the Baptist were sitting here today, he would stand up and say:

"Brood of vipers! Who has given you the right to twist the Word of God and hide behind it? Repent! That is the command!"

No, this is not an activist sermon by John the Baptist. But his words collide with the self-righteousness of religious people; They oppose the outward religion of the Sanhedrin, which is why they cannot accept them.

And then there is another concern: so many people are coming to him...

Soon they may begin to think that he is the Messiah.

This calls for a proper investigation. So the Pharisees and the scribes send what we might call an investigative committee: "Go and find out."

They are given two questions to investigate:

Who exactly is this man, the Baptist?

What is he doing? What is he saying?

Read verse 19:

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? —this is the investigation—"Who are you?"

Who are you, really?

"He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"

He states it openly and immediately:

"I am not the Christ!"

They continue questioning him:

And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No.

Literally, John says—and notice how his answers become shorter:

"I am not."

"Are you then Moses? Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

"Perhaps you are a new leader, someone who will deliver Israel from Roman oppression?"

John's answer becomes even shorter:

"No!"

It is striking that John the Baptist's answers become increasingly brief. He seems to grow irritated by the questions. He becomes somewhat impatient. His replies become shorter and shorter.

First he says, *"I am not the Christ!"* Then he says, *"I am Not !"* And finally, simply, *"No!"*

Congregation, there is a twofold lesson in John's answers.

First, a lesson for office-bearers—for myself and for the brothers of the church session.

Matthew Henry writes:

"The ministers of Christ must remember well that they are not Christ Himself. Therefore, they must not presume to exercise His authority, claim His royal rights, or appropriate the honour that belongs to Christ alone."

Anyone who places himself on a pedestal as a servant of Christ diminishes the honour of Christ. That is the message for us.

The second lesson is for you, the congregation.

The message is this: Stop idolising ministers!

One says, "I follow Apollos." Another says, "I follow Paul." "I prefer that tradition." "I belong to that movement."

Whoever places a servant of Christ on a pedestal—whoever he may be—takes honour away from the Bridegroom, from Christ Himself.

"No," says John, "I am not the Christ!"

It is true that, if all is well, we are friends of the Bridegroom. But if you point to us, we must firmly answer,

"No!"

"Pastor, that was such a wonderful sermon. We listened so well."

No!

Don't do that.

"Pastor, that illustration was so beautiful. Where did you find it? Did you think of it yourself?"

No!

Don't say that either.

The devil lays his snares to capture the servants of Christ, so that they begin to think highly of themselves and seek the honour that belongs to Christ. But that comes at the expense of the Bridegroom's glory.

"No!" says John.

Who is he?

He first tells us who he is not:

"I am not the Christ. I am not. No!"

Then, in verse 23, he tells us who he is:

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias". (Isaiah 40:3).

I am the voice...

Am I the minister? Am I the elder? Am I the teacher? Am I the father? Am I the one elected to...? Am I the one called as...?

No!

I am the voice...

Boys and girls, can you see a voice? Can you hold a voice? Can you touch a voice?

No. A voice is almost nothing. It is air—air that carries a message, breath that conveys a message.

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

I proclaim openly and boldly, and I cry aloud! For words that freeze on our lips will never break cold hearts, nor will they cause the wilderness to blossom like a rose.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness.

I cry out in the midst of a wilderness—a place full of dryness and barrenness, filled with unbelieving, hostile, and stubborn people.

I cry:

"Make the way straight!"

Raise up the valleys. Bring down the hills and mountains. What is crooked must be made straight, and what is rough must become level.

For the Messiah is coming!

But there is not yet room for Him.

Therefore:

Make room for the Messiah! Make room for Him!

Preaching that calls people to repentance is not preaching that urges a kind of self-generated activism. Rather, preaching that calls to repentance seeks to make room for the Messiah, for Christ.

Repent, and put away your sins—even your hidden sins.

See who you really are!

See your lost condition, your rebellion in Adam, your hostility toward God, your spiritual death.

Look honestly at your sinful life.

See your sinful thoughts, your sinful desires, your sinful fantasies, and your sinful words.

See your hidden sins.

No one else sees them, but God does.

What you secretly watch, what you secretly do, what you secretly say.

And what you do online—digitally, on your computer or your phone.

See also your public sins.

Acknowledge this:

Your life is full of sin.

And then—break with it!

Repent!

Turn around and return to God, confessing your sins before Him.

That is the message of the voice preparing the way for the Messiah.

It is just as Rev. Erskine once said:

"The needle of the law draws the thread of the gospel."

The law exposes sin in order to prepare the way for the Messiah, for Christ.

Therefore John's voice cries out:

Look into the mirror of God's law and see that, despite your outward religion, you are a sinner—a great sinner before God.

Repent!

A voice like the blast of a trumpet that, through the power of God's Spirit, shatters every false peace in the heart.

A voice like a trumpet that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, breaks the heart.

For in hearts that are complacent, self-satisfied, and self-confident, there is no room for the Messiah.

The Word, carried by the voice of one crying in the wilderness, makes room! At the deepest level, it is the incarnate Word—Christ Himself—who makes room for Himself.

He is the One who opens blind eyes, so that we begin to see who we are and what we have done.

He is the One who creates hunger, so that the hungry stretch out their hands for the Bread of Life.

It is He Himself who touches hearts through the voice of His Word and causes the brokenhearted to cry out, "Heal me; save my life!"

It is Christ Himself who breaks hearts by the voice of His Word and causes those who are crushed in spirit to plead, "Lord, have mercy on me."

Has the voice of the living Word ever touched you like that? Has this voice ever been addressed to you: "Repent!" Like the people on the Day of Pentecost, of whom it is written that when they heard what Peter said—when he sharply confronted them with their sins—they were cut to the heart. They were pierced; they were deeply convicted.

Tell me honestly before the Lord: has the Word of God ever affected you in that way?

When that happens, you do not say with quiet pride or satisfaction, "It was that minister," or, "It was that elder's sermon that touched my heart so wonderfully."

No, with shame upon your face you say, "That was when God began to speak into my life. That was the end of me. I was brought low before Him."

It is the convicting work of Christ. It is God's sovereign grace when the Spirit of God, with mighty and irresistible power, breaks the resistance of His opponents, His enemies—religious enemies, ungodly enemies, rebels alike.

When He awakens life in my spiritual death, when He opens my blind eyes and shines His light into my darkness, then I begin to see who I really am.

"Who are you?" That was our first point.

"Who are you?"—so that I, too, may give an answer to the One who sent me.

You answer, "Me? I am lost. I have sinned against God. Is there still a way for me to be saved? Lord, Thy standard is infinitely high, and I have sinned against Thee."

But is that enough?

Have you arrived simply because you have seen your disease? Because your lost condition has been exposed?

Have you arrived because the doctor has made the diagnosis? Because he has shown you that you have a deadly illness?

Have you arrived when you are standing in the gate of Sodom, about to leave the city? Is that the time to rest?

No! Do not stop there!

This is only the road that, as verse 23 says, is prepared by the voice of the Word. It is made ready in order to bring you to Christ.

You must come to Him!

For this is what Isaiah says in **Isaiah 40:3-4**

3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

Everything that stands in the way is cleared away by the voice of the Word, by the broom of the law: sin, but also pride, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-confidence—everything!

And then—only then—the glory of the Lord will be revealed. Then the Messiah, then the Christ, will be made known, says Isaiah.

Before we continue with our second point, let us sing together from **Psalter 83: 1-3**.

The friend of the Bridegroom: John the Baptist.

First, who he is: the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

Now, secondly:

2. What the Friend of the Bridegroom Says

They asked him (verse 25), "And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?"

"What exactly are you doing here? Tell us, Brother John, by what authority are you baptizing here at Bethabara? You cannot simply begin your own private baptismal ministry! Who has given you the right to baptize on your own authority?"

John does not hesitate.

Immediately he puts his baptism into its proper—and very limited—perspective.

He says,

"I baptize with water."

This is not a ceremonial cleansing according to the laws of Moses.

Nor is it the actual washing away of sins.

It is only a sign.

But the reality signified—the thing to which the sign points—is God's work. It is the work of the Holy Spirit: the washing away of sins.

"I am only a voice."

"And I baptize only with water."

But...

Now we come to the heart of our text in verse 26:

"there standeth one among you, whom ye know not"

Think carefully about those words:

"There stands among you One whom you do not know."

Boys and girls, just imagine that I would say the mayor is sitting in church!

And you look around to your left and to your right.

The mayor in church you say,

"I don't see him."

"But if I say, 'I can see him,' and you say, 'I can't see him,' then we have a problem."

How is that possible? What is the explanation?

It may be—and of course I hope that is not the case—but it may be that you are blind and simply cannot see anything. Then I understand why you would say, "I don't see him."

But there is another possibility. If I tell you that the mayor is sitting here in church, and you say that you do not see him, it may simply be because you do not really know what the mayor looks like.

You might say, "I'm not quite sure what the mayor looks like."

So you look around, searching for a man—but later you discover the mayor is actually a woman.

Or you are looking for someone with gray hair, only to find out later that he has black curls.

Or you expect an elderly gentleman, and later discover that he is a young man.

You are looking. You are searching. But you do not recognize the mayor because you do not know him.

And if you do not know the mayor, you will not recognize him.

Then I would say, "Yes, I understand why you do not see him. But he really is here! Truly! You do not see him because you do not know him."

Now imagine the scene at the Jordan River, boys and girls.

There stands John the Baptist.

A great crowd has gathered.

Among them are people who honestly confess their sins and are baptized.

There are also others—and that has always been the case and still is today—people who grumble and argue among themselves about John's preaching. They say, "John ought to preach about something else!"

And then there are the investigators sent by the Sanhedrin, openly asking, "Is this really acceptable? Does John have the right to do what he is doing and to say what he is saying?"

Then suddenly John—the same John who has just said, "I am not the Christ!"—suddenly declares:

"I see Him! He stands among you, yet you do not know Him!"

"He is standing right here among you.

You do not see Him because you do not know Him.

But He is very near.

I see Him standing among you!

You are looking, but you do not see Him, because you do not know Him."

And that is still true this morning.

Here in this church.

The voice of a man—far less than John the Baptist—repeats this morning the same proclamation in your midst:

"He stands among you!"

Yet for some of you it is just as it was with the mayor:

You are looking. You see Him, but you do not recognise Him.

For if you are honest, you must admit,

"I do not know Him."

Perhaps you expected a king who would bring happiness, peace, and prosperity, and who would give you a good place in His kingdom.

Or perhaps you expected a Messiah with whom you could cooperate—to build a better world, a better church, or even a better version of yourself.

And that is why you have seen nothing.

Why is it, congregation, that so many people—even seeking sinners—do not see Christ?

Let me mention several reasons.

a. Some people are simply indifferent.

They have no desire, no time, and no real interest.

It was exactly the same in the days of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus.

People came, but they were not truly interested.

They listened, but not really.

They became irritated, and in the end they walked away.

This evening I could say to you:

"You do not see Him because you are blind. The Light shines in the darkness, but you see nothing."

That is dangerous.

It is eternally dangerous.

For if you say, "I do not know Him, and I have no interest in Him," then one day He will say to you,

"I do not know you either. Depart from Me."

b. There are also people who are interested.

You say,

"I would like to know the Lord Jesus."

And yet you still do not see Him.

Again, it was the same in the days of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus.

Many people sought Jesus.

Even Herod, who later had John beheaded, wanted to see Him.

Why?

Because he wanted to witness a miracle!

Something spectacular!

A miraculous healing.

Or perhaps to eat bread that had been multiplied by a miracle.

They sought Him, but they did not know Him for who He truly was:

the One who came to save lost sinners.

So I could say to you this morning:

"You do not see Him because you are looking for something else."

That, too, is eternally dangerous.

Especially if you think,

"I don't see Him. Oh well, never mind."

c. There are also people who say that they do see Him and know Him.

They say they have chosen Him.

But when the conversation turns to sin and guilt, they really do not want to hear about it.

That is strange.

For did He not come as the Savior of sinners?

Did He not come to deliver sinners from the greatest evil and bring them to the highest good?

To you I would say:

If you want nothing to do with your sins, then I believe you are looking at someone else.

Someone who may resemble Him, but who is not the real Jesus.

For the true Jesus is the Savior of sinners.

d. Then there are also people—perhaps you are one of them—who are truly seeking Him.

Life has become a burden to them.

They long to see Him.

They long to know Him.

They are people who cry out and pray in secret—and perhaps even now, while sitting here in church, your heart is praying:

"Lord, I am so blind.

I do not know You.

Please reveal Yourself to me.

I am bowed down beneath the burden of my sins.

O reveal Yourself to me as the Mediator!"

Yet even these seeking people so often do not see Christ.

Although He comes so near and says—even this morning—

"I am standing among you, in your very midst."

Still they do not see Him.

Why?

Verse 26 gives the answer:

They did not know Him.

In fact, that was also true of John the Baptist at first.

He says in verse 31,

"I knew him not"

Later, in John 9, the man who had been born blind—the very man whose sight Jesus had restored—said:

"Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?"

If all is well, that is the confession of every child of God and every servant of God.

There was once a time—and I say this honestly—when this was true of me as well:

I did not know Him.

Therefore, there is never a single reason for anyone to boast. It is fitting for every servant of God, like John the Baptist, and for everyone who fears God, to say honestly—truly honestly:

"But I did not know Him either."

But then, in verse 33, John says:

"God pointed Him out to me."

"And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost."

It is God Himself who points Him out to John the Baptist and to all His children.

That was true then, and it is still true today:

"Behold, the Lamb of God!"

He is the Christ! He is the One!

Perhaps you say,

"I seek Him with all my heart. It is the great need of my life. But I do not see Him. What should I do?"

First, ask the Lord Himself to reveal Christ to you.

Ask Him to remove every obstacle and break down every barrier.

Ask Him to open your blind eyes, to give you light concerning His work, and to direct the spotlight of His grace upon His Christ.

Second, bring that deep need before Him, just as the man born blind did.

Simply say,

"Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?"

Or say, as the Samaritan woman did,

"I know that the Messiah is coming."

In other words,

"Lord, who is He?"

And then, in His own time, He will say to you:

"You have seen Him"—though at that time you did not yet know Him—"and He who is speaking with you is He."

"I am He. Here I am."

Then the man who could hardly hide his irritation when people mistook him for the One who had sent him suddenly begins to sing the praises of the Bridegroom!

And is not his voice—even today—a God-given means to direct your eyes to Christ?

So that you, who seek Him but do not yet know Him, may see Him and come to know Him?

A voice that points with words and says,

"Look to Him!"

You who are seeking Him,

You who do not know how to find Him,

You who do not know how you will ever come to know Him—

Look!

Look to Him!

Then John tells us two things about Him.

The first is found in verse 27:

"He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose."

He existed before I did.

He was there in the beginning, at creation itself.

He is the eternal Word.

He was, and He is, God.

Yet notice this carefully:

He wears sandals.

For He has sandal straps.

That means He is also truly man.

The Word became flesh.

Come and see!

A Man who is truly and eternally God.

He is the One you need.

He alone—seeking sinners among us—can and will deliver you from your mountain of guilt.

He is both mighty and willing to wash away your sins.

He came to deliver sinners from the greatest evil and to bring them into the highest good.

That is the first thing John says about Him.

The second thing he says—and this takes place the following day—is found in verse 29:

"Behold! The Lamb of God!"

Now John points not only with his words but also, as it were, with his finger:

"Behold the Lamb of God!"

It is as though John is saying,

"Do not look anywhere else.

Do not look to yourself.

Do not look to anything else.

Look to Him."

Everything that comes from yourself—whatever it may be—is insufficient.

You cannot pay the ransom for your own soul.

That is why you need a Lamb.

There He stands:

The Lamb of God.

He stands before you.

He stands among you.

See Him this morning!

Standing as One who has been slain:

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Congregation, should we not honestly admit that even we who seek Him often do not truly know Him?

Why is that?

Because deep down in our hearts—look into the hidden corners of your heart—we are still seeking our salvation somewhere else.

Especially in ourselves.

Because this is so humbling for us:

He in my place.

Suppose someone were to say,

"Here is a man who is willing to pay \$50,000 to set you free!"

I would gladly say,

"Yes!"

But when someone says,

"Here is the One who is willing to redeem you with His own blood, like a lamb that has been slain,"

I am inclined to say,

"No."

Why?

Because that humbles me.

The slain Lamb shows me how great the wrath of God is that rests upon me.

It shows me the greatness of my sin.

It shows me that there is no other way than the way of shed blood.

And therefore it shows me what a terribly ungodly person I truly am.

It is no wonder that while John proclaims the beauty of his Bridegroom, he also says,

"I am not worthy."

"I am not worthy to untie His sandal strap."

I have no claim upon Him.

I do not even have the right to perform the work of the lowest slave by loosening His sandals, let alone washing His feet.

Who am I?

That is the heartfelt sigh of John.

And is that not, congregation—children of God—the very reason why we so often have so little sight of Christ, of His work, and of His saving merit?

When my heart cries,

"Who am I, O God, before Thee?"

When I confess,

"I am not worthy."

Indeed, what I deserve is Thy wrath.

Lord, I deserve Thy holy anger a thousand times over.

Then—only then—He becomes precious to me.

Then my heart says,

"How great Thou art!"

Thou art far more beautiful; Thou excel beyond all the sons of men. For grace has been poured upon Thy lips—for such a sinful person as I am.

When I confess, "I am not worthy," then, in His own time, the Holy Spirit directs my unworthy eyes to the worthiness of Christ. Then I begin to know something of Him. Then I see a little more and come to understand a little more of His infinite worth: eternal God and perfect Man.

The eternal God, perfect in holiness, was willing to become man.

Then I begin to see something of the fact that He became that for me.

He was the eternal God, yet He became man.

He left His Father's dwelling and the glory of heaven and descended into this miserable world.

I had no claim upon Him.

I was unworthy.

And yet He did it.

And yet He came.

What an incomprehensible wonder!

He came for me as well.

The King of heaven and earth became a Man who wore sandals.

A Man who carried a cross—in my place.

Are there any such unworthy people here this morning?

"I am not worthy to untie His sandal strap, to wash His feet as a slave. I am not worthy that He should come under my roof. I am not worthy to be called His son or His daughter."

If, in our unworthiness, we may look to Christ like this—and may God Himself direct our eyes to Him—then what awaits us?

If, in our unworthiness, we may flee to Christ, then this is what awaits us, just as it did the returning prodigal son:

"His father ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him."

And the son said to his father,

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee, and I am no longer worthy to be called Thy son."

"I am not worthy."

That is true.

And it always remains true.

Not just once, but again and again.

"I am no longer worthy to be called Thy son."

But the father said—and this also always remains true—to his servants:

"Bring out the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost"—"Yes, Lord, I was lost"—"and is found!"

And I say,

"Yes, Lord, Thou have found me."

And they began to celebrate.

And they sang:

"Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing."

Amen.