

## What PREVENTS Me...?

We live in a world filled with the concept (or the intention) of “prevention.” For better and for worse, prevention is all around us. We’re told to prevent everything ranging from forest fires and obesity and fossil fuel consumption to sexism and whatever the latest “phobia” is (homophobia, transphobia, etc) and “fascism” and “racism” (I put these in quotes because many who are so militantly trying to prevent these things have no idea what they really mean) and nuclear war and climate change and worst of all—political incorrectness—*the unpardonable sin in today’s culture*. High taxes are levied against cigarettes in the hopes that it will prevent people from smoking. Laws are passed/enforced in order to prevent/curb bad behavior. Laws are now being passed that aim to prevent men from competing in women’s sports or using women’s bathrooms; laws that some people are actually trying to prevent! It’s crazy, isn’t it? This past year we’ve seen prevention in spades. Just one easy example: In an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID, people have been prevented from entering places of business (or even going outside in some states) if they’re not wearing a mask. Things got so crazy in the name of prevention that people were actually prevented from going to church. Many a congregation was forced to close, under threat of fines and imprisonment (and bad publicity and public shaming). Folks were prevented from assembling together in God’s holy house for worship. So—yeah—we understand the concept of prevention. It’s all around us. It’s everywhere.

With all this mind, it should come as no surprise that the concept of prevention fills the pages of Holy Scripture too (the Greek word is *ko-lew-o*); e.g., the disciples preventing/hindering children from being brought to Christ; the disciples preventing someone from casting out demons in the name of Christ simply because that guy wasn’t one of the twelve; Peter, upon witnessing the mini-Pentecost miracle of Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentile household of Cornelius, asks: “Can anyone withhold/prevent water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”; **and the one that really rattles my cage**: Peter, when confronted by the Circumcision Party in Jerusalem for daring to fellowship with those who were uncircumcised (i.e., Cornelius and Co.), responds by saying, “If God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who was I to *stand in the way* (*ko-lew-o*) of God?” A little side note: the word for “prevent” (*ko-lew-o*) derives from the root word (*ko-lahd-zo*), which means, “to punish” (see Acts 4:21 and 2 Pet 2:9). This only makes sense. After all, to withhold Christ and His means of grace; to prevent/keep people from Christ (think Word and Sacrament) is, in a very real way, to punish them.

So... should we be surprised at all when we hear the Ethiopian eunuch ask the apostle Philip, “*What PREVENTS (ko-lew-o) me from being baptized?*” The reason the eunuch asks this question of Philip is precisely because eunuchs, by

God's own commands in the OT, were prevented/forbidden from participating in the temple life/worship life of God's people (ref. Deuteronomy 23:1-3; Leviticus 21:18-20). They were excluded from temple worship, not for any sort of moral or ethnic reasons, as if they were worse sinners than anyone else, but because they were understood to be "blemished," which meant they were excluded by the purity laws in the same way that blemished lambs were not acceptable as sacrifices. ***It's not that they were excluded from heaven, but they were excluded from entering into the temple area and participating in the worship life of God's people.*** This is why the eunuch is struggling with the Scripture he is reading (Isaiah 53). He can't enter into the assembly of God's people, which means he can't inquire "*What does this mean?*" He's been left on his own. \*\*The eunuch's struggle is a prime example of why proper evangelism cannot simply consist of "just give 'em a Bible" or "just give 'em a pamphlet/tract."

Here's the thing: In Christ, all the Law is **fulfilled** (not abolished!) The Word-Made-Flesh brings about a great reversal, from sin to salvation, from death to life, from cursed to blessed, from excluded to welcomed! Look no further than the setting of this event. Like God had been saying for centuries through the prophet Isaiah, the desert now becomes the place of life. In this case, it's quite literal! It is here in this inhospitable place that Almighty God works the miracle of life. (Take note: This is all part of God's plan. He doesn't send Philip to a huge metropolis or university town where all the "important" people are. He sends him to a barren and desolate desert... to do mission work and grow the kingdom.) ***It is here in this land of desolation and death that the eunuch is being welcomed into the household of God.*** \*When you think about it, the eunuch is, in a sense, a "father of faith" for us. Because of him and his experience, we, who were once far off and dead (not just blemished, but DEAD) in our sin, are still being taught today through him and his experiences. Because of him, we are still being given the gift of Life.

Now, how does this great reversal and miracle of faith and salvation take place? It's actually quite simple, isn't it? Philip proclaims Christ. He ***begins*** with the "Suffering Servant" passage, which is where the eunuch was struggling and had questions, and he tells how it is ***all fulfilled in the work and person of Christ the Lord.*** But he doesn't stop there. We don't know how long Philip taught. We often assume that it was for a couple of minutes, simply explaining these couple verses and then they come upon some water, and *-poof!*—this guy immediately gets baptized. **I can guarantee that this isn't how it happened!** Philip most likely taught for some time, maybe throughout the rest of the day, and maybe even into the next day. At any rate, it is obvious from the eunuch's question about baptism that Philip's catechesis ***necessarily*** included teaching on baptism into Christ. Why else would the eunuch ask, "*Here is water. What prevents me from being baptized?*"

This is so very important for us to consider! Is our evangelism/mission work directing people to where Christ is to be found—Word and Sacrament? Remember: God can work the miracle of life and faith anywhere, be it a barren desert, the break room at work, the gym, over the backyard fence... anywhere. Think about your “mission efforts.” ***Are we simply talking about Jesus, or are we leading them to Jesus in His means of grace?*** All true mission flows forth from the altar, font, pulpit out into wilderness world, but it also necessarily flows back to the altar, font, and pulpit. All true mission is circular in nature, centered up on Christ and His means of grace. There’s a big difference between coming to church and coming into the presence of Christ!

“*What PREVENTS me from being baptized?*” Maybe the better questions we need to consider this morning: What prevents me from coming into the presence of Christ to worship and receive His gifts of grace? What prevents me from pointing others to Christ? What prevents me from sharing Christ? ***Like it or not, the answer to all those questions comes down to the fellow in the mirror.*** What prevents me from coming and worshipping in the presence of Christ? What prevents me from receiving His gifts of grace? More often than not, it’s me. I prevent it. What prevents me from pointing to Christ? What prevents me from sharing Christ? Me. And I can come up with a million excuses as to why it’s okay too. (It’s not.) I’m standing in the way of God.

Looking at the other texts for today. What prevents me from “discerning the spirits” and testing whether or not what I hear is God’s Truth or the devil’s lies? Me. Do I bother to open the Bible and read, mark, learn, and inwardly-digest? Do I bother to ask questions and seek clarity? Do I ask “What does this mean?” Or... am I too busy checking my Facebook and playing on my phone? Am I too proud to hear that what I believe might be wrong? What prevents me from loving my brother? Me. I claim to love God, but I still hate my brother. ***God says that makes me a liar.*** That’s not good! What prevents me from being such a liar? Me. My pride. My arrogance. My hard-heart. My sin. Me. I stand in the way of God and His love; love for me and love for the other guy; the guy Jesus loved enough to die for. “*Yeah... but God just doesn’t understand. That guy is a jerk!*” ***I’m discerning that spirit, and it ain’t coming from God!*** What prevents me from abiding in Jesus and having His Word abide/dwell in me? Answer: Me. But it’s so much easier to go along with the world than it is to stand against it. What prevents me from bearing good and God-pleasing fruits; good fruits that make Christ known and give God all the glory? Answer: Me. Sure, I’ll ask God for all kinds of things that my little heart desires, but do I ask God for things that are in keeping with His will/desires? Do I ask God to change me to conform to His will? ***Is my will “Thy will,” or is there a disconnect?*** Jesus says to ask for this great reversal and change to take place in your life. Why? Because our heavenly Father is glorified when we bear much fruit and prove to be Jesus’ disciples. So what prevents me from asking to bear these good fruits? Answer: Me. I’d rather ask to win the lottery.

You know what? We're coming at this from the wrong perspective. Look to this cross. What prevented Christ from giving up all of heaven's majesty to take on flesh for your sorry and sinful rear-end? **Nothing.** What prevented Christ from going to the cross to suffer, not just physical torment, but the eternal wrath of God's righteous anger for all our sin? ***That's kind of a trick question.*** Guys like mighty St. Peter ***tried*** to prevent this from happening on more than one occasion, right? *"Not on my watch, Jesus! This will never happen as long as I have something to say about it!"* Peter even drew his sword and hacked a guy's ear off while trying to prevent this from happening. *And yet... Jesus prevented the good-intentioned (yet evil) efforts at prevention.* Why? Because such acts of prevention were not in keeping with "Thy will." Nothing would prevent Jesus from carrying out the Father's will. What prevented Jesus from throwing His hands up in the air and saying, *"Forget it! They're a bunch of sinful, rebellious, and thankless fools! It's a lost cause!"* Answer: His love for you and love for His Father. Nothing can separate us/prevent us from the love that God has for us in Christ and because of Christ, not even death itself. Look at this cross. This is how much God loves you!

Now... look to the font and the altar and the pulpit/lectern. Here is this same almighty God, in your midst, to bring you His free and unmerited gifts of grace and peace and a love that you will never be able to fully comprehend. Nothing has prevented Him from coming to you with these gifts; not viruses, not quarantines, not world wars or great depressions or pandemics or anything else. Look around. How is God still working this miracle in our midst today? Consider COVID and the "shadowy valley of death" that we are making our way through nowadays. Consider the "Christian wasteland/desert" we find ourselves in nowadays. How is this little assembly a veritable "life-giving oasis" in the midst of the Word/Sacrament wilderness? Answer: Here is Christ. Here is where His Word is rightly taught (full Law and full Gospel), and here is where His Sacraments are rightly administered. Here is Christ, right where He promises to be, now and to the very end of the age. May nothing prevent this Christ-centered, Immanuel Good News from you, and may nothing prevent you from sharing this Good News and pointing others to Immanuel God in our midst.

**AMEN**

You know... the only thing that ever prevents Christ from bestowing the over-flowing abundance of His gifts of grace and love on you is YOU! ***By God's grace, may this no longer be the case.*** Ask... and it will be done for you. We are free to ask for whatever we please, ***but what pleases the child of God?*** Answer: What pleases the child of God is that which pleases God. This is how God is glorified, when you bear much good fruit and so prove to be disciples of Jesus and children of God. Let us do just that. Let us ask for this great reversal and change to take place so that we can bear good and God-glorifying fruits. We now join our hearts and voices together as we sing the offertory (pg 192 LSB). *"Create in me a clean heart, O God...."*