

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Nativity of St. John Baptistⁱ
(June 24)

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of Malachi.ⁱⁱⁱ

“For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

“But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts.

“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb [HOAR-ebb] for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“... Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew [SHOW] John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

“And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias,^v which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

“But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The Second Lesson today reminds us that John the Baptist was the messenger who went before the face of the Lord to prepare the way. The words “my messenger” are the same as the name of the prophet who wrote the scriptures that the Lord quoted—Malachi. That name means “my messenger” or “my angel.”^{vi} For this reason John is pictured in iconography with the wings of an angel.

Since the Second Lesson reminds us that John the Baptist was, in the words of the prophet Malachi, the special messenger who prepared the people to see Jesus Christ and to receive Him, we should ask why it is that we have Penitential seasons, that is Advent and Lent. I believe everyone knows what goes on in New Orleans just before Lent. The

Mardi Gras has become completely decadent and pornographically lewd. They have corrupted the idea into one of whooping it up right up until Lent comes and spoils all the fun. Hardly a good way to prepare for Christ. I am glad that they don't do this before Advent as well.

Obviously, we don't restrict Penance to just two seasons, anymore than we restrict faith in the Resurrection exclusively to the Easter season. Each season reinforces an important element of the Christian life in its fullness. Back in Maryland, before Saint Andrew's moved into an historic and beautiful church, we had a hot water pot that boiled the water for the coffee, and, with only one room, we had to turn it on long before people came in and began to prepare for the service by praying because otherwise they would hear the pot wailing and mourning with great lamentation and woe while the water boiled.

We decided that it was a water pot for the Penitential seasons, for it wailed more forcefully than a bagpiper's Lament. But, it was the only water pot, so it always made its noise, and we always had to turn it on early, not just in Advent and Lent. And, like that deeply convicted water pot, we need to carry into the whole year the sober message of these penitential seasons. And, neither, in these seasons, do we lose our joy and hope in Christ. In fact, if you paid attention to the Scriptures and to the Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent—for which the Gospel is the taken from the same Chapter as is today's Second Lesson—you see that the message there is the message of John the Baptist.

That is, it tells us to be prepared for the sudden appearance of the Lord Himself. To be prepared to meet Christ in the final judgment, we all need to live here and now, properly prepared to receive Him in the Blessed Sacrament of His Body and Blood. So the message of Advent, with its penance and its hope, is a year-round message, telling us always to be prepared to receive Jesus Christ, Really and Truly Present among us and in us.

The Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent and that day's Epistle^{vii} show us that bishops, priests and deacons are placed in His Church to be stewards of the mysteries of Christ, in order to teach His people this very thing: To be ready to meet Him. The picture of John the Baptist is used by the Church to remind the messengers that we too

must prepare the people for the coming of the Lord, for the day when He shall appear in glory, and we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

So the Second Lesson today reminds us of the messenger, John the Baptist. People do not understand John because they see his message only in negative terms. They think it terrible that he was a “hell fire and damnation” preacher (though, I need hardly point out, that the real hell fire preacher in the Bible was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The Baptist was mild by comparison). When John the Baptist appears in movies, he often looks and acts like a wild man, and the wardrobe department replaces the camel’s hair garment he wore with something that seems to have come off of Fred Flintstone.

But, if we look at the record of what really happened, as it is in each of the Four Gospels, it was John who gave the people hope. The Pharisees had no message of hope for sinners and the Sadducees had no message of hope at all, believing that there was no life beyond the grave (which is why the Sadducees were sad, you see). Furthermore, the Pharisees seemed to think of sin in terms of social class instead of in terms of one’s relation to God. But, of course, the most important line was that of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He said to the Pharisees that the tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them, because the tax collectors and prostitutes repented at the preaching of John. People came from miles around to confess their sins and to be baptized by John, with his baptism of repentance.

You know, we do not have the most affirming message: that is, we do not have a message that says “I’m okay, you’re okay” like a certain book from the 1970s. Anyone who leaves these services thinking he has been told how good he is, has not paid any attention to our liturgy. We do not approach God thanking Him that we are not as other men, boasting of being “good people.” Rather, “we bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed.” Frankly, there is no other way to approach God.

I will tell you now that I could not do what I do here for you if I did not, myself, from time to time, go to one of Christ’s priests, confess my own sins, and hear those words, “I absolve you....” I do not know

why so many people think that confession is just for Roman Catholics. Anyone who knows the Ordinal of the Church of England must know that the priestly power to absolve, to forgive sins, has always been a very important part of Anglican practice. We never abandoned it.

Furthermore, as King David wrote, “Blessed is he whose unrighteousness is forgiven....” Confession hurts before you do it but it brings joy to the heart after it is done. It is the most healing experience a person can have. Believe me, I know. As a priest I know what it is to be on both sides. You see, I am a sinner too; and without the ministry of the sacrament of Absolution, I would not know the joy, the freedom and lightness of the life in Christ—not lightness as in silliness, but as in liberation from a heavy weight. “Come unto Me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” It is so.

Be prepared for the appearing of Christ Himself. “Every eye shall see Him.” This is for this that John was sent to prepare the people. It is what we teach you, as stewards of the Mysteries of Christ, the mysteries revealed in His word, and the seven Mysteries or Sacraments.

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The Rev’d Robert Hart^{viii}
December 11, 2011

ⁱ *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass on the Third Sunday in Advent, 2011.*

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days (1928), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Malachi 4:1-end (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Matthew 11:2-19 (KJV).*

^v *E.g., Elijah.*

^{vi} *The word “angel” itself simply means “messenger”.*

^{vii} *I Corinthians 4:1ff.*

^{viii} *Rector, St. Benedict’s Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.*