

Sermon for Morning Prayer Christmas Eve

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of Baruch.²

“... O Jerusalem, look about thee toward the east, and behold the joy that cometh unto thee from God. Lo, thy sons come, whom thou sentest away, they come gathered together from the east to the west by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the glory of God.

“Put off, O Jerusalem, the garment of thy mourning and affliction, and put on the comeliness of the glory that cometh from God for ever. Cast about thee a double garment of the righteousness which cometh from God; and set a diadem on thine head of the glory of the Everlasting. For God will shew thy brightness unto every country under heaven. For thy name shall be called God for ever, The peace of righteousness, and The glory of God’s worship. Arise, O Jerusalem, and stand on high, and look about toward the east, and behold thy children gathered from the west unto the east by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the remembrance of God. For they departed from thee on foot, and were led away of their enemies: but God bringeth them unto thee exalted with glory, as children of the kingdom. For God hath appointed that every high hill, and banks of long continuance, should be cast down, and valleys filled up, to make even the ground, that Israel may go safely in the glory of God. Moreover even the woods and every sweetsmelling tree shall overshadow Israel by the commandment of God. For God shall lead Israel with joy in the light of his glory with the mercy and righteousness that cometh from him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-seventh Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.³

“... And his father Zacharias [*zack-are-EYE-uss*] was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn

of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he swore to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing [**SHOW-ing**] unto Israel.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And his father Zacharias [**zack-are-EYE-uss**] was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied....”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

Our Second Lesson today is the portion of St. Luke’s account of the birth of John the Baptist where John’s father, Zacharias, having silently signified his assent to his wife’s choice of name for the baby, is relieved of the dumbness the Archangel Gabriel had inflicted upon him when he presumed to doubt that angel’s announcement of Zacharias’s forthcoming paternity.⁵

The remainder of this passage is Zacharias’s song of joy at the birth of his son, an event for which he had long since given up hoping because of his and his wife’s advanced ages. This “Song of Zacharias” should be familiar to all Anglicans, and certainly is to all of them who regularly

say or sing Morning Prayer, it is the *Benedictus* which is the preferred Canticle after the Second Lesson in that office.⁶

Thus every time we say Morning Prayer, we are reminded by Zacharias's outburst of joy of the miraculous nature of the birth of John the Baptist. And it is important that we remember that because it was one of four miraculous births, two in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament, which were God's way of signaling to us the extraordinary authority of the men so born.

The first of this series was Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah,⁷ when Sarah was long past the age of normal biological fertility. This conception and birth were in fulfillment of an earlier promise God had made to Abraham⁸ and was so important to the founding of the Israelite people that Abraham and Sarah's names were changed to mark their new status as the progenitors of a great nation.⁹

The second such miraculous birth was that of Samuel,¹⁰ Israel's great priest and prophet in the period of transition from the Judges to the Kings. In this case Samuel's mother suffered not from advanced age but from some unexplained but prolonged barrenness. This was only cured after she made a pilgrimage to the cultic center at Shiloh, prayed for God to grant her a child, and promised to dedicate that child, she were granted one, to the service of the Lord.

The third such miraculous birth was that of John the Baptist, born to be the herald and forerunner of the Messiah,¹¹ which we have already discussed. And the fourth such miraculous birth was that of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, which we celebrate today. In this case, the biological difficulty that was overcome by divine intervention was not the mother's advanced age, not her organic infertility, but, instead, the simple absence of a biological father who could have permitted normal conception.¹²

Conclusion:

Not only did this Virgin Birth signify special divine activity, in the same way as the three prior miraculous births had, but the overcoming of this particular obstacle to conception was also an express fulfilling of Isaiah's prophecy, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign;

Behold, a virgin¹³ shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.”¹⁴

So the circumstances of Our Lord’s human birth are part of the evidence that convinced His post-Resurrection followers that He is, indeed, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Saviour whose coming the Old Testament prophets had foretold.

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1 Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

2 Baruch 4: 36-5:9 (KJV).

3 St. Luke 1: 67-80 (KJV).

4 St. Luke 1: 67 (KJV).

5 St. Luke 1: 19-22.

6 The Order for Daily Morning Prayer, The Book of Common Prayer 14 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

7 Genesis 21: 1-2.

8 Genesis 15: 1-21.

9 Genesis 17: 1-8.

10 I Samuel 1: 1-28.

11 St. Mark 1: 1-8; St. John 1: 6-8, 15, 19-27.

12 St. Matthew 1: 18-25; St. Luke 2: 1-14, 36-38; St. John 1: 1-14.

13 The Hebrew word ‘almah may be translated as “young woman” or “girl” but also as “maiden” or “virgin”.

14 Isaiah 7: 14 (KJV).

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