

Sermon for Morning Prayer: The Third Sunday in Advent

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“... Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

“But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

“... ”

“Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“... Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed [SHOH-d] great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called

him Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**], after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea [**Joo-DEE-uh**];. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel [**IZ-rail**]; 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 sware to our father Abraham [**ABE-ruh-ham**], 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 [**IZ-rail**].”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.”

Homily:

The emphasis in Advent is on the preparation of God’s people for the coming of the Messiah. The collect for today asks God to help us who are “ministers and

stewards of his mysteries” to do our job of preparing people to receive Him as their judge.

The New Testament lesson tells of the birth of John the Baptist, whose call to repentance was a prelude to the ministry of Jesus on earth. The Old Testament lesson tells of the calling of Jeremiah to join the long line of prophets who discerned and announced the intention of God to send a savior who would bring justice as well as salvation and peace to His people.

God’s words to Jeremiah predict the fate of those who join that long line of prophets, which began with Moses and ended with John the Baptist: “They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you.”

To be a real prophet, it seems, is not a pleasant job. Does that seem strange? One would expect that the work of preparing for the coming of the Messiah would be a happy task. But the church insists on somber purple as the color of Advent, and the world insists on persecuting those who are sent to prepare the way for Christ.

The problem, I think, is that people in positions of power like things the way they are. That is why it was the poor and powerless people, the people on the margins of society, who responded favorably to the words and work of both Jesus and John the Baptist while the elite sought to silence them both.

The message that a savior is coming carries an ominous implication. It implies that a savior is needed. If a savior is needed, then something must be wrong somewhere. And the message of Advent is that something **is** wrong. Something is wrong with society, and more importantly, something is wrong with the people who constitute society. Something is wrong with us.

People tend to cling to what they know, even if they are not happy with it, rather than take a chance on something that could be worse. I can’t tell you, for instance, how many women I have talked to who seem to think that a husband who abuses them is better than no husband at all. It is uncomfortable to change the circumstances under which we live.

But if changing the circumstances under which we live is uncomfortable, changing our own selves is downright painful. It is painful to look deeply into our

own hearts and realize that the real problems are located there. It is frightening to realize that it is you who must change and not the people around you. But Advent is a call to face that realization.

It is easier to blame our circumstances rather than ourselves for the way we live. That may be the real reason that people don't like to change the circumstances under which they live or the people with whom they live. If they did, then they would no longer be able to locate their problems outside of themselves. They would have no more excuses. They would have to do what Advent calls us to do. Look inside. Examine your own soul. Get rid of what is sinful and make room for what is Godly.

The world into which Jesus came had the same institutions as the world we live in today. Rome was the center of political life. Athens was the center of intellectual life. Corinth was the center of commercial life. Jerusalem was the center of religious life. But Jesus was not born and did not grow up in any of those places. He was born in the sleepy little village of Bethlehem and grew up in the country town of Nazareth. God gave the back of His hand to the great institutional structures of society. He was not really interested in changing them. He was interested in changing people's hearts. He still is.

It is people who create society and not the other way around. So the call to repentance is directed to each one of us individually.

When I present you with the holy bread I say, "The body of Christ which was given for you." I do not say, "The body of Christ which was given for the institutions of society." When I give you the consecrated wine I say, "The blood of Christ which was shed for you." I do not say, "The blood of Christ which was shed for the world in which you live."

When you stand before the judgment seat of God, you will answer for your own sins; not for the sins of others. But here is the important thing. You can lay all your sins on Jesus and let Him answer for them in your behalf.

So dig out your sins. Look deep inside, not only at the things you have done but at the things you should have done and failed to do. Look at your attitudes. Look at your values. Look at your relationships with other people. Look at how you spend your time, and your money. Look at what you are doing with the abilities that God has given you. If you don't like what you see when you examine

those things, or if you think that God will not like what He sees when He examines you, then the time to change is now.

You can't do it by yourself. But you don't have to do it by yourself. God has made available to you many resources: the Scriptures, the Prayer Book, and especially your fellow Christians, who will be glad to pray for you if you ask. But mostly God has sent His Son to pay the penalty that your sins have incurred. As St. Paul says, "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin so that so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

And God also sends the Holy Spirit to guide you and encourage you and comfort you and strengthen you to make the changes that you need to make, not in your environment but in yourself.

A message like that is not likely to be popular. That is why God says to Jeremiah, "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you." But popular or not, the call to repentance is the church's Advent message and my message to each of you today.

--oo0oo--

December 13, 2009
St. David's Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia