

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of Zechariah.³

“Again the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts; If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes? saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts. Thus saith [SETH] the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness.

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“... Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark.⁵

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; as it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. 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. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; and preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost. And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.”*⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Never hold fast to the things of man, but rather to the things of God.

St. John Baptist had initiated his ministry of calling for repentance from sin in order to obtain forgiveness, but he made it clear that it was not he who forgave, but God, and that it was not he who performed the Baptism of the Spirit, but Jesus Christ who would come after him.

The prophets had long said that there would be pardon if the people of Israel would return to the Lord and again live in covenant with Him, but John’s call was direct and personal, appealing to each and every one who heard his words to turn from their sinful ways of living and to return to God in a personal sense.

Whatever the leadership of Israel might do, this new call of John’s was to each person, independent of the leadership. Many of the people of Israel responded, we are told: *“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.”*⁷

The people of Israel were desperate for a real, transfiguring relationship with God, not requisite upon the legalistic minutiae of the Pharisees, but rather upon a direct, personal, and powerful interaction between themselves and their Lord. In John’s words they heard a true call back to that relationship. In his simple explanation of what God wanted from them, they found the possibility of saving grace.

John, however, did not want them to cling directly to him. He made it clear that it was not he who would save, but Jesus Christ who would follow him. The Lord is coming, John warned, and repentance from sin is what was necessary to prepare for him.

He carefully drew the distinction between himself and the Messiah, stating, *“There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.”*⁸

John was placing himself clearly as the servant of the Messiah, assigning to himself one of the lowliest tasks a servant could take on. As he is described in the Gospel of John, *“The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.”*⁹

John’s witness and task was to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah into the world. He was to call the people of Israel to repent, to prepare themselves to be servants to God and to submit themselves to God’s plan for forgiveness of sin through the Sacrament of Baptism.

The immediacy and urgency of John Baptist’s mission made it evident that he did not refer to some future time. He was not a prophet, but rather a herald. He did not make vague future claims, but sounded an immediate warning of the need for response.

After his brief ministry of calling the people to repentance and Baptism, John would disappear from the scene. John found himself cast into prison and later beheaded. Jesus' ministry of proclaiming His Gospel was just beginning. The time of waiting, as John had declared, was over. The time for distant prophecies and future predictions had past, giving way to an immediate need to act.

One of the very first acts of our Lord was to submit to John's Baptism even though He Himself needed no forgiveness. Jesus Christ, the very son of God incarnate, permitted Himself to be Baptized by John, not because He needed Baptism, but because He needed to demonstrate that He was under the law in order that He might then change that law.

However, as Jesus arose from the water of Baptism, something occurred that had never happened before. Heaven itself opened to Jesus, and the Holy Ghost, "*like a dove descended upon Him.*"¹⁰ God the Father acknowledged Jesus as His Son on earth, saying, "*Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*"¹¹

Throughout Jesus' ministry on Earth, we see this same pattern exhibited. He always first appealed to the blessing, the grace, the power and the authority of God the Father in all that He did. His message over and over is that the ways of men are founded upon false premises and are bound to fail and cause grief and pain. Only by following God through the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospel can we ever hope to find forgiveness of sin, restoration of spirit and salvation. Never depend on the works of man, but hold fast instead to the things of God, for in them only can God be found.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour by preaching repentance; Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*¹²

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January 20, 2013

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Zechariah 8:1-8, 20-23 (KJV).

⁴ "Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Mark 1:1-11 (KJV).

⁶ St. Mark 1:8 (NIV).

⁷ St. Mark 1:5 (NIV).

⁸ St. Mark 1: 7-8 (NIV).

⁹ St. John 1:7-8 (NIV).

¹⁰ St. Mark 1:10 (NIV).

¹¹ St. Mark 1:11 (NIV).

¹² Collect for the Feast of St. John Baptist (1928 BCP).

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