

are we ready, not only for His Advent this Christmas, but ready for the coming *parousia*, His Second Coming?

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¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 32:1-18 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 1:26-45 (KJV).

⁴ II Timothy 3:14—4: 8 (KJV).

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken. The heart also of the rash shall understand knowledge, and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly. The vile person shall be no more called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful. For the vile person will speak villany, and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail. The instruments also of the churl are evil: he deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words, even when the needy speaketh right. But the liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand. Rise up, ye women that are at ease; hear my voice, ye careless daughters; give ear unto my speech. Many days and years shall ye be troubled, ye careless women: for the vintage shall fail, the gathering shall not come. Tremble, ye women that are at ease; be troubled, ye careless ones: strip you, and make you bare, and gird sackcloth upon your loins. They shall lament for the teats, for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine. Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briers; yea, upon all the houses of joy in the joyous city: Because the palaces shall be forsaken; the multitude of the city shall be left; the forts and towers shall be for dens for ever, a joy of wild asses, a pasture of flocks; Until the spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest. Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field. And the

work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places....”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.³

“... And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias **[zack-are-EYE-uss]**, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to

season, that we cannot see the beauty in which we are about to celebrate. In our festivities we search for joy, in our exchange of presents we search for acceptance, and when things don’t go our way during this holiday season, when tend to give up and wish this time would hurry up and pass, so that things might be better next year when, when we find ourselves going to the same dried up wells, for joy and peace, and acceptance.

We are on the brink of celebrating the birth of the Messiah, a time that we should cherish, as a reminder that the presence and authority of God has been ushered in to our existence in the person of Jesus Christ. And yet we become blinded by fulfilling our responsibilities of minutia, that we will miss the opportunity to see Him as He is. It is for this reason, I believe, this lection appointed for our Gospel this morning, is so important. It brings back to focus, that which is lost by our hurried, unforgiving, and secular lives. That even though we await the celebration of the birth of Christ on Christmas day, we are can be centered on the fact that there standeth one amongst us. And the question that’s most important, in light of John’s indictment to these leaders within our Gospel lection, is “Do you know Him?”

He is already here! Immanuel, God with us, is here. He is here in Sacred Scripture. He is hear in the Most Blessed Sacrament, an epiphany or theophany, every time the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated. He is here in the gathering of the faithful, because He has promised that where two or three are gathered in His name, He will be present. But the question still remains, “Do you know Him?” Is He present within you and seated on the throne of your hearts? If the answer to that is no, then we can identify ourselves with the priests and Levites. While He is present among us, we still don’t know Him.

Let us take this time, this last week before the celebration of His Birth, to take time out and prepare for what’s really important. Are we drowning in our own religious illusions, or

But the priest's and Levites could gather all that John was saying. They could not piece together the connection of Isaiah's prophecy in which he quoted from Isaiah chapter 40:3, or the fact that even Malachi in chapter 3:1, pinpointed one to precede the coming of the Anointed One of God, to prepare the way. And since the answer they received from John, wasn't the answer they were looking for, their angst and anxiety turned to anger. Well then, if you are not the Christ, or Elijah, then by what authority do you have to preach and baptize, since you haven't been cleared by us to do so. And their blind religiosity took over the rest of the conversation. And now this darkness that we spoke about earlier, they remained in it by choice, instead of providence.

They could not see the greater glory of what was about to transpire as Jesus the Messiah was about to show up on the scene. And the answer that John gave them came from the very same source who inspired to write them just a few centuries earlier, because we see in Luke chapter 1:15 that, "he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." The very scriptures that these religious leaders spent a lifetime learning, were being fulfilled in the dialogue with St. John. Blinded by their own religiosity, they were not willing to ready themselves in preparation of the coming King.

John then said something that was revolutionary. And it is even relevant for us today. While they continued their search for the Messiah, he was walking about them. And so John said, "but there standeth one amongst you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me." And so in their blindness, they turned and walked away, unable to see that the presence and authority of God was being ushered in by the one who was sent to prepare the way.

How does this all tie in to what we are preparing for today? We get our selves so wrapped up in the activities of the

pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord."

Or,

Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the third Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.⁴

"... But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

"I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day:

and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Well, we are finally a week away from the celebration of our dear Lord and Savior’s birth. And during these past four weeks of Advent, we have been called by Holy Mother Church to prepare ourselves for this particular coming. We await in joyful desperation the coming of this Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. But in preparing for the ecclesial celebration of the coming feast of the Nativity, we also get bogged down by the preparations of our secular celebration of this joyous season. Insomuch, that by the time Christmas day arrives, we are more ready for this time to pass, because of the pressures of the responsibilities we place upon ourselves, shopping for gifts, planning meals, hosting parties, getting ready for family visits.

We place so much weight upon ourselves, that the Joyful celebration of Christ’s birth, the spiritual preparations that are to accompany this glorious time, get lost by the wayside. And instead of rejoicing that this time is upon us by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, we can’t wait until it is all over so we can return back to nominal living where we have no responsibilities and the stress we place upon ourselves. And this time which should be bright and full of cheer, ends up becoming dark and gloomy, as our hearts and minds are in other places than beside the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph as they make their sojourn towards Bethlehem, where she will soon give birth to the one who will take away the sin of the world, and offer to us the gifts of grace and healing to a sick and diseased world.

This darkness takes us back to the waiting of the Jewish faithful, who knew the words of the prophets about the coming

deliverer, yet sat in the stillness and silence from the voice of God. From the last words of the prophet Malachi to the Annunciation of Christ’s birth given to the Holy Virgin by the Archangel Gabriel, a span of 400 years elapsed. And for a nation, whose beginnings were as a Theocracy, God’s not speaking to them was a great disappointment.

I am sure that by the time that the Levites and priests questioned John the Forerunner, as seen in our Gospel lection for this morning, the angst had built so terribly great as they awaited the one whom they thought might deliver them from the fearful grip of pagan Rome. Sitting through God’s silence must have been uneasy. And the moment these religious leaders heard of one preaching that a coming kingdom would soon advance upon them, their suspicions grew to the point where they had to go and see for themselves just who this one preaching was.

They were hoping to find the one promised for by the prophets. And so the question “Who art thou?” was fueled by angst and anxiety. They were looking for the one, the one who would lead them to independence. But John knew his place. A voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord!” From the moment the Baptizer leapt in the womb of righteous Elizabeth, upon the greeting of the Holy Virgin impregnated with the Word of God being woven into our flesh in her womb, he knew the vocation and call to prepare the hearts of men for the coming Messiah was upon him.

Now being a descendant of the lineage of Aaron, John’s place was to be in the temple serving as a priest, just like his father Zacharias, but the priestly role that John was about to take on was one of great importance, and greater than any sacrifice he could have made in the temple. He was to prepare the hearts of the earthly temples, so the King of Glory could come and sit on the throne of their hearts, within the holy of holies, which is man’s soul.