

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Nativity of St. John the Baptist¹
The First Evensong

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Malachi.⁴

“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to this temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi [LEA-vye], and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts. For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.⁵

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias⁶ [ih-ZAY-uhs],⁷ saying, The voice of one crying in the wil-

derness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday in Advent, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year A.

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³ *Lessons Proper for Holy-Days*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlvi (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

⁴ Malachi 3:1-6 (KJV).

⁵ St. Matthew 3:1-end (KJV).

⁶ *I.e.*, Isaiah.

⁷ W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 32 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).

⁸ St. Matthew 3:11 (RSV).

face your loneliness. Turn off the music and listen to the silence. Turn away from your possessions and look at your sins. Turn away from all the lights and peer into the darkness of your soul.

If you don't like what you see, then John's message is for you. The One Who is coming will remove the sickness of sin from your life. He will give you a whole new outlook, a whole new center, a whole new reason for living, a whole new strength, and a whole new set of relationships.

Conclusion:

But you are not ready for that until you have been to see John. You have to repent before you can be transformed. You have to turn away from your old ways and our old values and your old habits and your old ways of looking at things. You can't be reconstructed until you have been de-constructed. That is what this lonely voice in the wilderness is calling you to do. "Repent," says John, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Before you can get to Christmas you need to go through Advent. Before you get to Jesus you have to deal with John. So don't just go to the mall to see Santa Claus during the run-up to Christmas; go to the wilderness to see John the Baptist. And listen to what he says:

"I baptize you with water for repentance but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

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Orange Presbyterian Church
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the Holy Spirit and with fire."⁸ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The text comes from this morning's Second Lesson. Referring to Jesus, John says: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John the Baptist represents the negative part of the process of salvation. He calls people to repentance, which means a turning away from old habits, old attitudes, old ways of living. He invites people to bathe in the river Jordan as a sacramental way of washing off the accumulated debris of their former lives.

I have never bathed in the Jordan river, but I do know how good it feels at the end of a really bad day to take a shower. Maybe I've made a lot of mistakes that day. Maybe I've been to a place I did not want to be. Maybe I had to deal with some people I do not like. Maybe I've been stuck in traffic, or locked my keys in the car, or maybe the washing machine and the refrigerator both broke down on the same day.

We've all had days like that. When I want to put all that behind me and forget about it, I throw my clothes into the laundry bin, step into the shower, and just wash it all away.

Something like that is what John the Baptist invited people to do. Out with the old; in with the new. That, for example, is one of the themes of Advent.

But John realized that repentance is only part of what is needed. There is a positive side to the process of salvation, and John was not able to provide it. His baptism was preparatory, not complete. So he said, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Fire is a familiar symbol of the Holy Spirit. We see that in the Pentecost story in Acts. A goldsmith uses fire to burn off the impurities from the gold with which he is working. In the same way, God the Holy Spirit separates what is true and good from what is false and wrong in each of us. Fire also makes things soft and malleable. Blacksmiths use fire to mold and shape the iron with which they work. So God the Holy Spirit molds us and shapes us into the image of God the Son.

Christian baptism incorporates us into the body of Christ on Earth. Within that body, which we call the Church, we receive the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, which is the very breath of God, we are nourished with the body and blood of Christ Himself. We are instructed by the written Word of God, and shaped by prayer and discipline into the very image of the Son of God. That shaping and forming and purifying is what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. That is the positive part of the process of salvation.

The ancient baptismal ritual of the Church, which was designed primarily for adults, reflected the two-fold emphasis of salvation. The candidate discarded his clothing and stepped waist deep into the baptismal pool. He faced the west, where the day ends, and said, "I renounce you, Satan, and all your works. I renounce the temptations of this wicked world and all its shallow pleasures."

Then the candidate submerged himself completely in the water. St. Paul refers to this part of the baptismal ritual as dying to sin. It was almost like a suicide. It was like someone standing on a bridge, saying, "Good-bye, cruel world!", and plunging into the water. This is the kind of baptism John offered -- a baptism of repentance, a turning away.

But in the ancient ritual of the Church, the candidate would then stand up in the pool, turn to the east, where the new day begins, and recite what we now call the Apostles' Creed. Then he

would emerge from the water, be clothed with a white robe, be marked with the sign of the cross on his forehead, and take his place in the company of the faithful.

That part of baptism, St. Paul refers to as living to God, and he explains it with the analogy of death and resurrection. St. John explains it with the analogy of being born again. That is the positive aspect of salvation, which the Baptist realized he could not deliver. So he says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

It is significant, I think, that John did his work in the wilderness, while Jesus did His work in the city. You see, God forms and shapes us in our interaction with many other people, but He prepares us to be formed and shaped by separating us from the noise and the turmoil and the distractions of the world. He calls us in the early stage of the process to a place where we can focus on the silence and the aloneness and the emptiness of our souls. That is what I call you to this Feast of St. John the Baptist.

The other time of the year when we think of John the Baptist is during our other penitential season, that of Advent. What is going on all around us at that time of year is denial. The denial of sin, the denial of loneliness, the denial of sadness, the denial of death, the denial of inequality and injustice. Then there is a false sense of camaraderie in the air, a forced atmosphere of celebration with nothing really identified as a cause to celebrate.

Then there are lots of lights. There are lots of gifts. There are crowds of people. There is lots of happy music. It is easy in that atmosphere to think, "Who needs a savior? I'm OK; you're OK. Life is good. Let's just be happy."

But John the Baptist calls us to turn away from the crowds for a while. Prepare yourself for the coming of the Savior by removing yourself from the busy environment of the secular world. Go off by yourself somewhere. Turn your attention inward and