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November 30, 2008.

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Third Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Malachi.²

“BEHOLD, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his 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 fuller’s soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi [LEE-vigh], 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 swearing, 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 [SETH] the LORD of hosts. For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

“...
“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb [HOAR-ebb] for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah [EE-lye-juh] the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

² Malachi 3:1-6 & 4:4-6 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 1:5-25 (KJV).

⁴ Malachi 3:1 (NIV 1984).

⁵ Malachi 3:5 (NIV 1984).

⁶ I Kings 18:25-40.

⁷ II Kings 2:11.

⁸ St. Luke 9:18-19.

⁹ St. Matthew 17:1-4; St. Mark 9:4-5.

¹⁰ St. Luke 1:16-17a (NIV 1984).

¹¹ St. Matthew 11:4.

¹² St. Luke 1:17.

¹³ St. John 1:21.

¹⁴ St. John 1:20.

¹⁵ St. John 1:23.

¹⁶ St. John 1:33, 35.

¹⁷ St. John 1:34 (NIV 1984).

¹⁸ St. John 1:36b (NIV 1984).

¹⁹ St. John 1:41.

²⁰ St. Matthew 16:16.

²¹ Charles Coffin, 1736; trans. John Chandler, 1837.

²² St. Matthew 26:26; St. Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 10:16, .11:24; Colossians 1:18.

²³ BONNELL SPENCER, *YE ARE THE BODY: A PEOPLE’S HISTORY OF THE CHURCH* (Holy Cross Publications 1965).

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The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Verse of the Gospel according to St. Luke.³

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea [**JOO-dee-uh**], a certain priest Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**], of the course of Abia [**ab-EYE-uh**]: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**] saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**]: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias [**EE-lye-uss**], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**] said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to shew [**SHOW**] thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my

And as we think upon these words, we realize that John the Baptist was the Messenger who, prior to the beginning of Christ’s ministry on earth, announced the eminent coming of the Lord. But that ministry was very short, only three years long. After it ended with Christ’s Ascension, who are the Messengers who now announce to the world that He has been here in His human body and that He is still here in His sacramental Body, the Church?²²

Walt Kelley’s cartoon character, Pogo the Possum, once memorably announced, “We have met the enemy, and they is us.” Well, my friends, the answer to my question is very similar. There is a wonderful old book that introduces and explains the Christian Faith, which is entitled “Ye are the Body”.²³ That means you, and of course also I, are collectively the Body of Christ, that is, His physical presence in this world for the time between His Ascension and His “Second Coming”.

In turn, that means we are also the Messengers who have been called to tell the world of Our Lord’s Incarnation, His continued presence with us, and His ultimate coming again.

So we must ask ourselves whether we, like John the Baptist, are faithful messengers for the One Who came and Who is to come again. Do our deportment, our lives, our manners, our actions – the things that in King James’ time were called “our conversation” – , our faith, and our speech all testify to the power of Him whom we claim has come to save not only us but all of mankind?

Will those who observe us during this season – and during the rest of this new Church Year – and who do not themselves yet know Him, see in us the working of His grace? Let me put it more simply yet: Will they perceive in us the presence or the absence of Christ?

There could be only one Messiah and that one must, necessarily, have been far more than a merely human prophet such as Elijah [**EE-lye-juh**] was, no matter how greatly inspired that man may have been.

Conclusion:

As we begin this Advent season of preparation for our celebration of Our Lord's Incarnation, we do well to recall the words of the old hymn:

“On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of Kings.

“Then cleansed be every breast from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
prepare we in our hearts a home
where such a mighty Guest may come.

For thou art our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;
without thy grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

“To heal the sick stretch out thine hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth and let thy light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

“All praise, eternal Son, to thee,
whose advent doth thy people free;
whom with the Father we adore
and Holy Ghost for evermore.”²¹

words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. And the people waited for Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**], and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And it came to pass that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: ““See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple: the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Note in particular two prophecies that are introduced in this very first Verse of today's First Lesson. One such theme is that the Lord says, “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” The other such theme is that the Lord Almighty announces that “the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple: the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.”

Now remember that Malachi was a prophet of the Old Testament. The coming of the Messenger to whom he referred is recorded in the New Testament. In fact, today's Second Lesson recounts the conception of that Messenger, whom we call John the Baptist, who was born to prepare the

way for the ministry and revelation of his cousin (in earthly terms), Jesus of Nazareth.

Theme:

Malachi states that the Lord Almighty has declared that the One for whom this messenger will prepare the way is Himself “the Lord you are seeking”, who will be “the messenger of the covenant”. From this conjunction of two clearly separate “Lords” we know two things”: that God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity, will be sending God the Son, the Second Person of that Trinity, and that God the Son, thus sent, is the Messenger of the new or fulfilled Covenant.

In other words, the entire history recorded in the Old Testament built up to this point, at which God’s various revelations recorded in that Testament now culminate in His final, perfect Revelation: the Incarnate Christ.

Development:

- 1. Today’s two Lessons make explicit the essential connection between the Old Testament prophecies, as recorded by Malachi among others, and the fulfillment of those prophecies in Jesus.**

Notice that Malachi expressly stated that “I will send you the prophet Elijah [EE-lye-juh] before that great and terrible day of the LORD comes.”⁵ This was undoubtedly not a statement that in fact Elijah [EE-lye-juh] would return to earth, but was meant as a metaphor. That is, where Elijah [EE-lye-juh] was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, who restored Israel to the worship of the true God after it had been led into apostasy by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel,⁶ the worship of the New Israel would be restored in the person of a new and even more powerful prophet.

The ancient Jews, however, took this prophecy literally and most of them believed that Elijah [EE-lye-juh], who did not die in the earthly sense but instead was caught up alive into heaven,⁷ would return in person. Thus many who saw and heard Jesus, or merely heard of him, believed that He must be Elijah [EE-lye-juh] come again in fulfillment of that prophecy.⁸ So, too, did Elijah [EE-lye-juh] appear together with Moses as Christ’s companions at His Transfiguration,⁹ symbolizing His fulfillment of those same prophecies.

Today’s Second Lesson ties the Old Testament prophecy of Elijah’s [EE-lye-juzz] return with Christ’s incarnation when it says of John the Baptist, “Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah [EE-lye-juh].”¹⁰ Thus both St. Matthew¹¹ and St. Luke¹² make clear that while a prophet equal to Elijah [EE-lye-juh] would, indeed, come as part of Christ’s Incarnation, that prophet was John the Baptist, the forerunner, not Christ Himself.

- 2. John the Baptist himself stated that he was neither Elijah¹³ [EE-lye-juh] nor the Messiah,¹⁴ but merely the forerunner for, or messenger of, the Messiah.¹⁵ John himself recognized that Jesus Christ, whom he had baptized, was the Son of God.¹⁶**

Some of those who encountered Jesus, or who even merely heard of His ministry, thought He might be Elijah [EE-lye-juh] returned as the prophecies had seemed to predict he would. However, John’s own words are unmistakable testimony that he, at least, knew Who it was that he had baptized: “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God”¹⁷ and “Look, the Lamb of God.”¹⁸ His recognition of Jesus as the Messiah predated that same recognition by the first of the Apostles to do so, St. Andrew,¹⁹ who came to that realization before, and reported it to, his brother, St. Peter.²⁰