

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.³

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar [TYE-beer-ee-uss SEE-zar], Pontius Pilate [PON-chuss PIE-lut] being governor of Judaea [JOO-dee-uh], and Herod [HAIR-ud] being tetrarch⁴ [TET-rark] of Galilee [GAL-ih-lee], and his brother Philip tetrarch [TET-rark] of Ituraea [Ih-TOUR-ee-uh] and of the region of Trachonitis [TRACK-un-eye-tuss], and Lysanias [LIE-san-ee-uss] the tetrarch [TET-rark] of Abilene [ABB-uh-lean], Annas [ANN-uss] and Caiaphas [KYE-uh-fuss] being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias [ZACK-are-eye-uss] in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias⁵ [Ee-ZAY-uss] the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

“Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin 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: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

“And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.

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

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The Rev'd Steven Victory⁶

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

² Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 3:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ Ruler over a fourth of a province.

⁵ Isaiah 40:3. The Authorized or King James Version of the New Testament faithfully transliterates Greek forms of Old Testament names, even of Hebrew ones.

⁶ Rector, St. Charles King and Martyr Anglican Church, APCK, Huntsville, AL.

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 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,

"And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: 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 will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable."

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.

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