

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

St. John Baptist (June 24)¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith [SETH] 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 goodliness 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:⁴ 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 Esaias [ee-ZAY-uss],⁶ saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 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 thoroughly [**THREW-lee**] 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: “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!”⁷ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The prophet Isaiah helps God’s people make sense out of the tragic failure of their exile in Babylon in the Sixth Century B.C. The seventy-year exile is to cleanse and chasten the people for their insistence on sin, for their covenant with death, so that they can start getting ready for their Messiah. God’s Word, spoken through Isaiah before and during the exile, will break the power of evil in Judah, and create a yearning for the Messiah.

When the fullness of time comes for the Messiah, God sends a successor to Elijah, to get the people’s attention, and to get them ready, the Messenger who will prepare God’s way. Today we celebrate that messenger’s birth, one of only three birthdays we celebrate in the Church: John the Forerunner’s, our Lady’s, and our Lord’s. All the other Saints’ Days are heavenly birthdays, when they die. Only the Forerunner, our Lord and our Lady have their earthly birthdays celebrated.

John the Forerunner got the people’s attention. God is constantly trying to get our attention. He can use spectacular events, as with Moses and the burning bush, or a still small voice, as with Elijah. He can use great blessings, as He did with Abraham, or other people, as He did with Jacob and Esau. He can use some aspect of life in the Church, such as music, preaching, Holy Communion, or special caring members of the Body. He can use suffering, tragedy and death to get our attention, as He did with Israel’s exile in Babylon.

John gets the people's attention by being born to a very old couple. The story starts with Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh], whose name means "the Lord remembers," and Elizabeth, whose name means "God is perfection." They are very old, and childless. Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] is one of eight hundred priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. All male descendants of Aaron are priests, and there are twenty-four groups of them, one for each of Aaron's twenty-four grandsons. Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] was of the line of Abijah [uh-BYE-dguh]. Each group was on duty twice a year for a week at a time. Lots were drawn to determine which priest would be serving, and many never got chosen.

It was a great day for Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] when he was chosen. He would be second only to the High Priest, and would burn incense at the altar of incense within the holy place, the first of two rooms in the Tabernacle. The second room was the Holy of Holies, with its replica of the Ark. The Congregation's prayers rise up to God with the incense. After representing the Congregation to God, the priest went back out to represent God to them, and give them a blessing, and Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] would do this with joy mingled with sorrow.

But Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] is delayed. Suddenly, on the right side of the altar of incense, the angel of the Lord appears to him:

"And when Zechariah saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zecharias [zeck-ar-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 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."

Zechariah [zeck-ar-EYE-uh] asks for a sign, a typical Jewish fail-

ing. His sign is that he is struck dumb, so that when he goes out to bless the people, he cannot, and they understand that he has seen a vision. After his temple duty he goes home, and Elizabeth conceives. John, like the prophet Jeremiah, even from his mother's womb, is anointed with the Holy Spirit for a special vocation. John gets the people's attention before he is even born.

John gets the people's attention when he is circumcised, eight days after birth, the day when the name is given, usually the name of the father or grandfather. Here, the name "John," meaning, "the Lord has been gracious," or "God's gracious gift," has been given by God. The people are amazed. The name is especially important, because it will say something about the character of the person, and this person's character, and name, have been given by God.

Zechariah [**zeck-ar-EYE-uh**], still dumb, is asked about the name, and he uses a writing tablet to concur with it. His tongue is loosed, he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and proclaims what we call today the *Benedictus*, used every day as a canticle in Morning Prayer, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people."

Everyone is amazed, and Zechariah [**zeck-ar-EYE-uh**] prophesies that John is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy hundreds of years before, that a voice would cry in the wilderness to prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord, that this voice would get the people's attention and point them to the Messiah.

What we see at John's circumcision is Jewish piety at its best, with Messianic hope, a spirit of expectancy, the priest's yearning, the people's hopes, patience and loyalty. And now, God has now acted to deliver us. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled: "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!" John is the Herald and Jesus, his cousin, is the Mediator. We have come to the sacred boundary between the Old and New Testaments. John is a watershed figure, the last of the Old Testament watchmen, and the first of the New Testament witnesses.

John goes as a child to the wilderness, the training ground of prophets. He is made strong there, by prayer and penance, to begin the work of another Elijah, to get people's attention, to lead them back to God, to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John will be no reed shaken by the wind, no man clothed in soft raiment. He is a prophet, and more than a prophet. He is the ultimate cosmic reconnaissance mission. He gets people's attention by being born to an old couple, and because of what happens at his naming, and now because of his preaching at the River Jordan, and because of his baptizing there. He is dressed to look like Elijah, in camel's hair. He preaches like an air hammer blasting at concrete, and called his fellows a generation of vipers. When Jesus comes to him for baptism, he says, Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!

John in the end was put in prison by Herod and beheaded. It is possible that the John of our day is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who said that the crisis of our time is that "men have forgotten God," and that the only way forward is a return to God, and a thorough application and integration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with every sphere of human thought and endeavor. His Christian faith was forged in the gulags of the Soviet Union, and for his convictions, he was exiled from Russia.

We too are called by our Collect today, each in his own way, to constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice and patiently suffer for the truth's sake. It is going to cost us everything in our country to rebuild a culture of life and a civilization of love. As we apply ourselves to this, we are part of a much larger reconnaissance operation.

We, like John, are not worthy to stoop down and unloose the latchet of the Lord's shoes. We should come like John, in humility, simplicity, and as the forerunners, to bring good tidings, to lift up our voice with strength, to lift it up, to be not afraid, to say unto our towns and counties, Behold, your God!

As we go forward, the Lord will ease from us our fears and anxieties, and give us an ever growing spirit of expectancy, of the great things

He will be doing in our midst, to get people's attention, and point them to a mighty Saviour.



The Rt. Rev'd Paul C. Hewett
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Lesson for the Epistle at Holy Communion on the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, 2012.

² "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).

³ Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV).

⁴ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Matthew 3:1-end (KJV).

⁶ *I.e.*, Isaiah.

⁷ Isaiah 40:9b (KJV).