

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Third Sunday in Advent

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.ⁱⁱ

“... Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

“But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

“... ”

“Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-seventh Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed [SHOH-d] great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came

to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**], after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea [**Joo-DEE-uh**];. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel [**IZ-rail**]; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham [**ABE-ruh-ham**], That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing [**SHOW-ing**] unto Israel [**IZ-rail**].”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel [**IZ-rail**]; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake

by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began;....^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Each time we recite Morning Prayer, and have finished reading that day's Second Lesson, the Canticle we usually read at that point is taken from today's Second Lesson. Today's Lesson is St. Luke's account of the birth of John the Baptist and the Canticle in the Morning Office is the portion of that account called the Song of Zacharias.

This is where Elizabeth has announced that the newborn baby's name will be John, the gathered family and friends have questioned that choice because it is not a family name, and the father, Zacharias, has confirmed her choice by writing on a tablet. When previously the Angel Gabriel had announced to him the fact of Elizabeth's pregnancy and the name the baby should bear,^v Zacharias had doubted the Lord's ability to fulfill this promise, he was struck with dumbness^{vi} as a lesson to him about faith.

Now he has seen the birth of the child which he had doubted God could provide and now he has complied with the Angel's direction for the baby's name, so his speech has suddenly been restored to him.

Theme:

On this occasion, as happened at least twice in connection with the conception and birth of Our Lord, Zacharias breaks into prophetic song, praising the Lord's mercy and providence. The other two such times were the Song of Mary,^{vii} praising God's Providence in the divine Christ child whom she would soon conceive, and the Song of Simeon,^{viii} praising God for having let him live until he had seen the promised Saviour.

As with the Song of Zacharias, we use both of those Songs as Canticles in the Daily Offices, the Song of Mary, or *Magnificat*, as the

usual Canticle after the First Lesson at Evening Prayer and the Song of Simeon, or *Nunc dimittis*, as the usual Canticle after the Second Lesson at Evening Prayer. It is highly appropriate that we should use them in this manner, for all three of these Canticles are songs of joy over God's gracious fulfillment of His prophecies to us, prophecies of care and salvation. Thus when we sing or recite them after the Scripture Lessons in the Offices, we are expressing our joy at the truths we have just heard again.

Development:

Zacharias's words have become so familiar with their daily repetition that we often do not pay close attention to what he actually says.

1. The Lord God chooses and calls them who will be His prophets.

Zacharias sang of "an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets...."^{ix} The horn is the instrument that announces the arrival of something important, our salvation, and that instrument is Christ. The coming of this instrument has been foretold by the holy prophets of the Old Testament, and today's First Lesson is the account of one of those Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah, of how he was picked out by God, called by God to carry God's message, and given by God the words of that message:

"Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

"But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee

over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”

Note here that it was God who not only chose Jeremiah to be His Prophet but God who had known from the time of Jeremiah’s conception that he was born to be a Prophet. It was not Jeremiah who announced that he thought being a prophet would be a pretty good gig. In fact, Jeremiah himself was clearly somewhat dubious about this prospect, so that he required God’s assurance that this was, indeed, all part of God’s plan and that God would give him the skills and talents he would need in this task.

2. God is always faithful to His promises and will protect and care for His people because He has promised to do so.

The Old Testament prophecies were not merely predictions of things to come, they were restatements of the promises God made to His people, through Adam, through Noah, Abraham, through Moses, and through the other prophets. As Zacharias sang, Christ was born as the ultimate fulfillment of and final blessing by these promises:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he swore to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.”^x

- 3. With Jeremiah’s career as a prophet, Zacharias’s son, John the Baptist, was conceived and born specifically for his task as the Herald, the Messenger, the Forerunner who would tell the people of Israel of the coming of their promised Messiah and would call them to repentance in preparation for His arrival.**

“And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”^{xi}

Conclusion:

The prophetic task did not end with the closing of the Canon of Old Testament Scriptures, nor with the last of the New Testament writings, nor even with the end of the Apostolic and Sub-Apostolic Ages. That task was handed on to the Church and, because the Church is composed of those of us who have been called to it by Our Lord, it is actually our task. By “us” I mean me, and each of you who are sitting here; there is no one else.

Like John the Baptist, we are called to go out and preach Christ to the world and to preach repentance in preparation for Christ’s coming. The only difference between John’s task and ours is that, for John, Christ was yet to come. For us, He has already come, and taught, and died, and been resurrected, and ascended, and, in addition to all that, He is yet to come again for the final time. It is that final Coming for which all must prepare by faith, prayer, repentance, and amendment of life.

Also, our means of preaching may be just a bit different than were John’s. Because of the customs and expectations of his society, he wore rude and primitive clothing, spent most of his time in the desert, and lived on a Stone Age diet, all as symbols of his holy asceticism. His listeners saw those things, interpreted them as signs of his holy commission, and paid attention to what he said.

In our world, these distinctive behaviors would probably have the opposite effect. For us to preach to those around us, we cannot effectively confront them face to face, railing at them that they are sinners. We all know of street-corner preachers who do that and we all know that the passing crowds avoid them and refuse to listen to their words.

We, unlike John, normally cannot confront our evangelistic targets, we must sneak up on them, like a hunter after a wary stag, and catch them when they are not paying attention. The best tool for us to do this is our own life and demeanor. When “teachable moments” arise in the lives of those around us, just as God gave Jeremiah the words he needed, God will give us the words of comfort, the words of solace, the words of love that will open hearts to His message.

It is then that, if we act as Christians should, and live as Christians ought, our demeanor and sincerity will stamp our words with the authority and force they need to penetrate those open hearts and convert their hearers.

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

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 1: 4-10, 17-19 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 1: 57-end (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 1: 68-70 (KJV).*

^v *St. Luke 1: 13.*

^{vi} *St. Luke 1: 20.*

^{vii} *St. Luke 1: 46-55.*

^{viii} *St. Luke 2: 29-32.*

^{ix} *St. Luke 1: 69-70.*

^x *St. Luke 1: 68-75 (KJV).*

^{xi} *St. Luke 1: 76-79 (KJV).*

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