

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Lessons:

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

“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 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: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar [**TYE-beer-ee-uss SEE-zar**], Pontius Pilate [**PONchussPIE-lut**] being governor of Judaea [**JOO-dee-uh**], and Herod [**HAIR-ud**] being tetrarch [**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 Esaias [**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.

“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 thoroughly 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.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “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.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

The third Verse of the fortieth Chapter of Isaiah, which is our text this morning, is probably as well-known as any other in the entire Bible. In the familiar words of the Authorized, or “King James” Version, its emphasis is a bit ambiguous but it becomes much clearer in the Revised Standard Version, which is also very similar to the same Verse in the New International Version:

“A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Note the subtle shift in emphasis: The voice cries with the declaration that it is in the wilderness, in the desert, that the preparation for Our Lord’s coming will take place.

What happens there will be as a highway for God as He comes to us.

Theme:

What happens in the wilderness is, of course, the ministry of John the Baptist, the herald and forerunner who calls the people of Israel [**IZ-rail**] to repentance in preparation for a very new thing. It is not the repentance that is new, for under the Old Covenant the Israelites [**IZ-rail-ites**] were expected to repent when they sinned against God. Then, however, their repentance was the end of the process: they repented and, if that repentance was sincere, then they returned for a time to following God, only to fall away again another time, when the cycle would repeat.

Development:

- 1. What is new is that now, for the first time, the people of the New Israel, that is, the Christians, could be assured that their repentance and amendment of their ways would not be the end of the process.**

Instead, they could now be confident that God had added a new step, which was His forgiveness of them. Thus instead of setting out to correct their previous erring ways, still borne down with the knowledge that they had incurred God's wrath, condemned by their own corrupt natures to incur it again, they could for the first time set out in the sure knowledge that God had both wiped away their past sinfulness and had given them the means to overcome their tendency to repeated sinning.

This is what St. Paul meant when he wrote to the Galatians, "Wherefore then *serveth* the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator." And again to the Romans: "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh..." and "For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified."

And Paul wrote to the Ephesians, emphasizing how Christ has healed mankind's separation from God that began with Adam: "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace."

2. Medieval heralds went to specified public places in their cities and announced to the populace that war had been declared or that combatants had been reconciled and so peace had been reestablished. In the same way, John was the herald who announced that mankind has been reconciled to God and perpetual peace between them has been reestablished.

There are still people alive today who can remember the day in 1945 when the English and Scottish Heralds, who are members of the Sovereign's official Household, marched ceremoniously to, respectively, the Royal Exchange in London and the Mercat [**MUR-kat**] Cross in Edinburgh, while the Royal Trumpeters sounded fanfares to get the attention of all passers-by. In each city, the Heralds then read aloud to any who happened to be present the formal declaration that the Axis powers had surrendered to the Allies and, therefore, that World War II in Europe had ended.

This is what we mean when we say John the Baptist was the Herald of Christ: he was the personal messenger of the sovereign who appointed him, charged with announcing an official declaration of peace:

“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 authors of the Gospels knew that this message was expressly intended to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the forerunner who would precede the Messiah, which we read in today’s First Lesson:

“[A]nd he came and went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, As it is written in the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
 “Prepare 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.’”

3. Jerusalem, the sacred city of the Old Covenant, will be the site and witness of the Messiah, that is, of God’s Coming in person to inaugurate the New Covenant:

“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.”

Conclusion:

Unfortunately, while the physical city of Jerusalem was indeed one site where Our Lord conducted His ministry as the Messiah, it was also the site and witness of His rejection by the people of the Old Covenant. Thus it was the city where He was reviled by the mob, conspired against by the leaders of the Jewish nation, unjustly condemned by the foreign Roman ruler, and cruelly and unjustifiably put to death.

Thus we use the name “the New Jerusalem” to designate the faithful witness to Our Lord’s Coming, death, Resurrection, and Ascension. This faithful witness is not a physical city but a spiritual one: it is the Church. We, each of us, you and I, are the residents of this New Jerusalem.

As we near the end of this Advent Season of preparation, penitence, meditation, and reflection, we each should take some time to ask ourselves four vital but intertwined questions:

Are we good citizens of this spiritual city? That is, have we ourselves heard and responded to the warning cried by John the Baptist?

Are we good witnesses to Our Lord’s Coming and to all that means?

If a wayfarer stops us and asks us about the King who is the Sovereign over our city, can we clearly and persuasively tell him or her the “Good News” of the Gospels?

And, finally and most critically:

If our questioner looks into our hearts, as many of them can and do, will he or she see in us the true spirit of citizens who live according to our city’s laws or will he or she reject us as liars and hypocrites, and so walk away, leaving the Lord’s message unheard?

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December 21, 2008.

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

2 Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV).

3 St. Luke 3:1-17 (KJV).

4 Isaiah 40:3 (KJV).

5 Galatians 3:19

6 Romans 8:3 (RSV).

7 Romans 10:4 (KJV).

8 Ephesians 2:14-15 (RSV).

9 Isaiah 40:3-5 (KJV).

10 St. Luke 3:3-6 (RSV).

11 Isaiah 40:9b-11 (KJV).

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