

Sermon for Morning Prayer: The First Sunday in Advent

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

Lessons:ⁱ

First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Malachi.ⁱⁱ

“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 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 fullers’ soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, 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 swearers, 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 the Lord of hosts. For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

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“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.

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

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea [**JOO-dee-uh**], a certain priest named 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 speak unto thee, and to shew 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 words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. And the people waited for Zacharias [**ZACK-are-eye-uss**], and marvelled 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: “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechari’ah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**], for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.’”^{iv}

Homily:

In the lesson from the New Testament, we meet a priest by the name of Zechariah^v [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**]. He was married to a woman named Elizabeth. The couple had no children, and in those days that was considered a tragedy.

The bearing of a child was considered essential for a wife to fulfill her womanhood. It was also important for a man to have a son to carry on his name, inherit his property, and thus provide some sort of eternal life. For a priest it was doubly important to have a son because the priesthood was hereditary. So when this devout couple said their prayers every day, they asked God, among other things, to give them a son.

But Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**] was surprised one day when the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to him that his prayers had been answered.

Now I can understand why a man would be traumatized, at the appearance of an angel. But that’s not what caused Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**] literally to be dumbstruck. He was able to protest and even to argue with the angel. That’s when Gabriel decided to shut him up before he talked himself any deeper into trouble.

You know, it’s perfectly all right to argue with God. I do it all the time. Abraham did it. Moses did it. Jacob even challenged God to a wrestling match. But you don’t want to argue with God when He decides to answer your prayers.

For one thing you shouldn't be asking God for things you don't really want. How would you like it, for instance, if God really did take away your vices and make you over into the image of Jesus? How would you like it if He entered every area of your life and took control of it? Are you really ready for that? Do you really want that? Or are you like a young Augustine [aw-GUST-inn] who is alleged to have said, "Lord make me holy, but not just yet"?

Zechariah [ZECK-are-eye-uh] really did want a son. His problem was that he did not believe God was capable of providing one for him. "I am an old man," he said, "and my wife is well up in years." That's when the angel bound his tongue and told him he would not be able to speak again until the child was born.

The child turned out to be John the Baptist, precursor and herald of Jesus the Messiah. His birth was timed to coincide with the birth of Jesus to a much younger woman. That was God's plan, and no human schedule or human biology was going to interfere with it.

Zechariah [ZECK-are-eye-uh] had been asking for something that he thought was impossible and he did not really expect that he would get it. That reveals a lack of faith. Our God is perfectly capable of working miracles. He does it all the time.

The Christian religion is based upon miracles. The Creation is a miracle. The Incarnation is a miracle. The Resurrection is a miracle. As I pointed out last Sunday, a miracle takes place right here at this altar every time we celebrate Holy Communion. You can't be a Christian if you don't believe in miracles. And you have no right to pray if you don't believe that God is capable of answering your prayers.

It is true, of course, that God does not always grant what you ask of Him in prayer, no matter how much or how faithfully you ask Him. But that is not because He is unable to do what you ask. It is probably because He knows it would not be the best thing for you. Or it may be that someone else would be adversely affected by granting you what you ask, as, for instance, when you ask that your team may win the big football game.

But the point is that prayer is not a frivolous activity or a *pro forma* exercise. You have to take your prayers seriously if you want to avoid simply mouthing empty phrases. It is very easy for us who read our prayers out of a book – prayers written by other people – to just rattle off words without really taking them seriously. I might add that making up your own prayers does not keep you from doing that. But God always takes our prayers seriously. He loves to hear our prayers, and there is nothing He is not capable of doing.

Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**] found himself unable to pray when he revealed that he did not really expect his prayers to be answered. He could think about what he would like to say to God but he was unable to say it until the birth of a son convinced him that God was indeed able to make things happen that seem to be impossible.

So pay attention to what you are praying for. Don't ask for something you don't really want, and above all don't ask for something you don't believe is possible. Remember Who it is that you are praying to.

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

ⁱⁱ *Malachi 3: 1-6 & 4: 4-6 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 1: 5-25 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 1: 13 (RSV).*

^v *The King James Version uses "Zacharias" and the Revised Standard Version uses "Zechariah". The differences come from slight variances in the two versions' transliterating the NT Greek, which itself transliterated the OT Hebrew, but the two forms are the same name.*