

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Third Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things; thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth. For thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defenced city a ruin: a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built. Therefore shall the strong people glorify thee, the city of the terrible nations shall fear thee. For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall. Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, as the heat in a dry place; even the heat with the shadow of a cloud: the branch of the terrible ones shall be brought low.

“And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.

“And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

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 [ponn-TEE-uss PIE-lutt] being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch [TETT-rark] of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch [TETT-rark] of Ituraea [it-you-REE-ah] and of the region of Trachonitis [track-un-EYE-tiss], and Lysanias [lie-SANN-ee-uss] the tetrarch [TETT-rark] of Abilene [a-bill-EE-knee], 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 Esaias⁴ [ee-ZYE-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

⁸ St. Luke 3:17 (RSV).

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John then told his listeners that this mighty One, the One whom he himself was not worthy to serve, would thresh and winnow the metaphorical grain God had raised up: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”⁸ This is a clear warning that the One Who was to come would judge the living and the dead and assign an appropriate fate to each individual person.

So in this season of penitence and reflection, each of us must ask himself or herself, when Our Lord comes and attends to His harvest, will I be blown away with the worthless lightweight chaff or will I fall back into the fan or fork along with the weightier grain that is the part worth being saved and stored?

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister⁹
December 11, 2011.

¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 25:1-9 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 3:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ That is, Isaiah. One of the peculiarities of the King James Version is that Old Testament names that appear in the New Testament are given as transliterations into English from their N.T. Greek forms rather than from their more familiar Hebrew O.T. forms. Thus in the KJV, the same name is spelled and pronounced differently in the text of the O.T. as compared with that of the N.T.

⁵ St. Luke 3:16b-17 (RSV).

⁶ PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER, ED., HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY 1067, s.v. "threshing" & 1135 s.v. "winnowing fork" (HarperSanFrancisco 1985).

⁷ St. Luke 3:16b (RSV).

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 Second Lesson: “[H]e who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.... His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

One of the traditional Advent themes – or, perhaps more accurately, four of the traditional Advent themes – are what the Church calls “the Four Last Things”. These are the inescapable – literally inescapable -- realities that confront every one of us at the end of our lives: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell.

Our world thinks the appropriate preparation for a becoming celebration of Our Lord’s Coming consists of frenetic shopping permeated with improbable reindeer, manic snowmen, constantly ringing bells, and the recorded *oeuvre* of long-dead cocktail lounge crooners. So, in that emotionally-charged atmosphere, it is unwelcome to be reminded of the sober truths that all things come to an end and that some of those ends are, most distinctly, not the ends we would have chosen had we really believed we had a choice to make.

Nevertheless, these realities do pertain to Advent because they are the very reasons that Our Lord came among us in the first place. He came because we are all destined to die, He came because He could overcome for us the limitations of those physical deaths, He came because without His mercy we are condemned to Hell, and He came because if we have faith in Him we have the chance of spending eternity in heaven in fellowship with Him, with God the Father, and with God the Holy Ghost.

So it is entirely suitable that the Lessons appointed for the Sundays in Advent should remind us of those eternal realities, of Death, of Judgement, of Heaven, and of Hell. And that brings us to one of the messages contained in today's Second Lesson.

This message is that of the inevitability of the Judgement and is couched in terms of ancient, manual harvest technologies. In the King James Version, St. Luke records John the Baptist as referring to "the fan", meaning the winnowing fan, an antique flat wicker basket used as part of the process of threshing the newly-harvested grain. In the Revised Standard Version, this is rendered as a "winnowing fork", which is a somewhat different instrument, but both tools were used for the same purpose; the two relate to one another rather as a mattock relates to a pickaxe or a peavey to a cant hook: different tool, same general purpose.

To understand this reference to winnowing fans or winnowing forks, we must recall how grain was threshed in ancient times – indeed, in parts of the Near East, up until within living memory. The newly-cut grain would be piled on a hard, beaten earth floor, and then either it would be beaten with flails or else heavy boards, sometimes with added keels or edges, would be drawn by animals across it. This pressure cut up the stalks of the grain, the straw, and broke

the individual kernels loose from their enveloping husks, the chaff.

Then the mixed grains and chaff would be winnowed, that is, separated. They were first picked up on a wicker fan, a shovel, or, preferably, a fork with tines so fine that the grains could not slip between them, and gently lofted into the air. The prevailing afternoon breezes would blow away the lighter chaff and the heavier grains would then settle back onto the fan or shovel or winnowing fork. Finally, pebbles and other debris would be picked out by hand⁶ and the cleaned and separated grains would be stored in the granary.

This familiar agricultural ritual provided John the Baptist's hearers with a readily-grasped image of the separation of the valuable portion of the harvest, which was to be kept safely, from the waste, which was to be cast away. Thus they easily understood this image as a metaphor for God's Judgement, in which the persons whom God has elected to save will be accounted as though they were righteous – although they and we know perfectly well that they are not – and those He has elected to condemn will receive the just reward for their iniquities.

Conclusion:

John the Baptist told his hearers that, shortly after he was speaking to them, Another would come, one whom he was not worthy to serve even as a slave. We know this was the Baptist's meaning, for he said "[H]e who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie..."⁷ This was a reference to one of a house slave's routine duties, which was to attend his master upon the master's return from outside in order to untie and remove the master's footwear. Thus, as in a modern Japanese house, the master's dusty shoes or sandals would not dirty the swept and clean interior of the dwelling.