

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the forty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... Thus saith [SETH] the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew [SHOW] unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.

“They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his fellows shall be ashamed: and the workmen, they are of men: let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; yet they shall fear, and they shall be ashamed together. The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms: yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth: he drinketh no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house. He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengtheneth for himself among the trees of the forest: he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it. Then shall it be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself; yea, he kindleth it, and baketh bread; yea, he maketh a god, and worshippeth it; he maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto. He

burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god. They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten it: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree? He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand? Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee. Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel. Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish; That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith [SETH] to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof: That saith [SETH] to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: That saith [SETH] of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

¹⁷ St. John 1: 26a (RSV).

¹⁵ *Guthrie, op cit.*

¹⁹ St. John 1: 27 (RSV).

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Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.³

“And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias [*ee-ZYE-uss*]. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara [*beth-AH-ba-rah*] beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

“The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Today’s Second Lesson is a most interesting passage from the Gospel of St. John. In one way, it represents the beginning of the cleavage between, on the one hand, the Jewish authorities’ expectations for any Messiah who might come, and, on the other hand, the realities represented by John the Baptist as the forerunner or herald of Jesus and by Jesus Himself.

You will recall from the Lessons read and the sermons preached during many Pre-Lenten and Lenten seasons that this cleavage was the ultimate cause of those Jewish authorities’ determination to put Christ to death. They simply could not understand that the Messiah was not to be the charismatic leader of a political and social rebellion, a sort of better-barbered Fidel Castro without the olive drab utilities, but instead was to be a spiritual and moral revolutionary.

At least in theory, those authorities would have welcomed anyone who could actually have freed them from Roman military occupation. (Actually, it is by no means clear to me that the minority of elite beneficiaries of the Roman settlement were particularly anxious to upset the political structures that protected their comfortable sinecures while it gave them local power and freedom of action in the religious and municipal spheres.)

Are we, any of us, prepared to repent of our sins, as John the Baptist calls on us to do, and then to confess them, so that we may receive the new cleansing from them?

Again, do we repent of our sins and are we ready to confess them? This is the second time of asking....

Once again, do we repent of our sins and are we ready to confess them? This is the third time of asking....

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister²⁰
January 9, 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* 32 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxi (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 44: 6-28 (KJV).

³ St. John 1: 19-34 (KJV).

⁴ St. John 1: 19 (RSV).

⁵ St. John 1: 20 (RSV).

⁶ St. John 1: 21a (RSV).

⁷ St. John 1: 21a (RSV).

⁸ St. John 1: 21b (RSV).

⁹ Deuteronomy 18: 15 (RSV).

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, John, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED 3rd Ed. 932 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

¹¹ St. John 1: 21b (RSV).

¹² St. John 1: 22.

¹³ St. John 1: 23 (RSV), quoting Isaiah 40: 3.

¹⁴ HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDS., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA Revised Standard Version 1287 fn. (Oxford University Press 1977).

¹⁵ MAY AND METZGER, *supra*.

¹⁶ St. John 1: 25 (RSV).

cial journey from the capital to find out just what he is up to. And now it appears that behind him there is someone else out there who makes this John fellow look like a piker. This, friends, is **not** good news for the government men.

But first, like a good stage performer, John sets up that important point with a “warm-up” comment: “John answered them, ‘I baptize with water’”¹⁷ – the accepted means of administering the official rite of ritual cleansing about which the Pharisees had asked him, thus implying that there is a new and different baptism coming on its way to them.¹⁸

Then he delivers the punch line: ““but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.””¹⁹

By this time, the visiting Pharisees must be truly at a stand. John is acknowledged by all to be a major religious figure, although his precise status is unknown and the nature of his mission is uncertain. Now this significant new factor in contemporary Jewish life has announced, in effect, two unsettling facts. First, the long-awaited Messiah is, indeed, coming in short order.

But as if that were not unsettling enough all by itself, the establishment’s experts are told in no uncertain terms that they do not know who this Messiah is and also that there is about to be a thorough cleansing of Jewish religion, a cleansing so substantive that it will involve a new and as yet unforeseen form of baptism.

Conclusion:

It behooves us to put ourselves in the places of those worried Pharisees. Are we any readier to meet the Messiah than they were? Will it be any more comfortable an event for us to experience than it was for them to contemplate?

But what were they to make of a man who steadfastly declined any traditional leadership rôle while at the same time He fulfilled, all too well, the job description of a particularly uncomfortable Old Testament-style prophet.

In the end, the risks Christ presented to that establishment were simply too great to be accepted, and so He had to go. And here, in today’s Second Lesson, we see the very beginning of that tragic misunderstanding forming as that religious and social establishment grapples to understand just who and what John the Baptist is. For it is with that establishment’s failure to grasp John’s true mission that commenced its later failure to grasp the nature of the mission of the One whom John foretold.

So let us look at just what it was that John says in answer to the Pharisees’ representatives. And as we do so, let us remember that these Pharisees, and those who sent them to interrogate John, were already unsettled because of the nature of John’s message. John called on all who heard him to repent, telling them the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Yet neither of these were things Jews were accustomed to hearing, either that they had need for repentance nor that Heaven was in some way intersecting, or about to intersect, with this physical world.

As Christians, we are used to being reminded, at least occasionally, about our sinfulness and our need to repent. The ancient Jews, however, thought only in terms of complying with the rituals and other outward demands of the Mosaic Covenant, or of failing to abide by those prescriptions. They had some consciousness of sin, it is true, but the notion that something could be done about that sin was a new and very startling suggestion.

The first thing we are told in this colloquy is: “He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”⁵ The title “Christ” means “anointed” and is from the

Greek root from which we get the word “chrism” for the oil of anointing. Thus “the Christ” is the same as the Hebrew *Meshiach* [***mesh-EYE-akh***] which is “the Messiah”.

So here John is telling the Pharisees that he is not the Messiah for whom all pious Jews are, at least in theory, waiting. But notice also that John’s denial that *he* is that Messiah leaves tantalizingly open the possibility that *someone else* alive at this same time *is* that Messiah. Indeed, very shortly John will clearly imply precisely that is the case, but we cannot be sure that the Pharisees understood John’s implication.

So, if John is not the Messiah, then that still leaves open the question, who is he? “And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’”⁶ They ask this because there is at this time a persistent tradition that the Messiah will be Elijah, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, returned in Israel’s time of need. But, alas, that is not to be, for “He said, ‘I am not.’”⁷

By now, the Pharisees’ scouts must be getting rather frustrated as well as rather confused. They know, if only from the populace’s responses to John’s preaching, that John is an extraordinary religious figure. But if he will not let himself be slotted neatly into one or another of the available pigeon holes provided by popular Jewish tradition, who the deuce is he?

So they try again: “‘Are you the prophet?’”⁸ By this, they mean, “‘Are you the prophet of whom Moses spoke in Deuteronomy, when he said, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed?’”⁹ In other words, “a prophet like me” meant a national political and religious independence leader like Moses himself was.¹⁰

But again they are disappointed, for John answers them, “And he answered, ‘No.’”¹¹ So, naturally, now that

they have run out of ready possibilities, they ask him what he has to say for himself: “They said to him then, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’”¹²

Now John puzzles them yet more, for he responds by quoting what is undoubtedly a Messianic prophecy from Isaiah. And it is by using this that he begins to suggest to them that while there is indeed a Messiah lurking in the neighborhood, that Messiah is not John but instead is someone to whom John is bearing witness: “He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.’”¹³

Here Isaiah uses the metaphor of an herald, who goes before a king or great nobleman, clearing the crowd out of the dignitary’s way so that he can proceed unimpeded.¹⁴ Thus John declares his own character as the herald or forerunner of the Messiah.

But this leaves yet another question. If John is not the Messiah, but is only a servant of the Messiah, why is John acting like an authorized religious official, performing public religious rites?¹⁵ So the scouts ask him: “They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’”¹⁶

And here John gives them his most famous answer, which is based on the contemporary fact that one of a house slave’s duties was to wait at his master’s door and, when the master returned home with the dust of the street on his feet, to untie the master’s sandals and wash that dust off. By using this image, John is declaring that he is even less than a slave of the Master whose coming he is proclaiming.

Think of the impact that revelation made on those questioners: John himself is so important a disturbance on the local religious scene that they have had to make a spe-