

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 1.68-79; Luke 3.1-6

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/423857552770844>

(Sermon begins at about 18:30)

“You Are a Prophet of the Most High”

This time of year, we talk about John the Baptist as pointing the way to Jesus. But what we don't often consider is that there are accounts in scripture that also point the way to the coming of John the Baptist. Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Malachi talks about God sending a messenger to the Temple who will purify the priests, restoring the priesthood to its rightful role and dignity. All part of the process of setting things back in order upon Israel's return from Exile. Part of God's ongoing process of setting things right for the eventual coming of God's Kingdom. In the Christian tradition, this passage is interpreted from a messianic perspective, with God sending a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. Of course, we now recognize, at least from this Christian interpretation of an ancient Jewish text, that messenger as being John the Baptist.

The response to the Old Testament reading is the Canticle of Zechariah. The song that Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims at the birth of his son, John the Baptist. This song starts off praising God for the promised coming of the Messiah who will bring deliverance and restoration of God's people. A promise that, at the time of Zechariah's proclamation, was yet to be realized. So, in a sense, Zechariah was himself serving as a prophet, proclaiming the impending birth of the Messiah. After extolling the virtues of what this Messiah would accomplish, how the people would benefit and be brought back into right relationship with God through him, Zechariah shifts his focus to his newborn son. “You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way” (Lk 1.76). Proclaiming the importance of John as the prophet, as the messenger, who would directly point the way to the Messiah.

The importance of John's role, as a prophet of the Most High who serves to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah cannot be overstated. This is evidenced by the sheer amount of space devoted to John the Baptist in the Gospel according to Luke. About a third of the first chapter of Luke is devoted to the birth of John the Baptist and Zechariah's prophecy in the form of the canticle that bears his name. And then the better part of the third chapter of Luke is devoted to the ministry of John the Baptist and his subsequent baptism of Jesus.

It is this proclamation, this living into the role of “prophet of the Most High,” that is the focus of this second Sunday of Advent, as laid out in our Gospel reading for today, with the formal introduction of John the Baptist to the world. This introduction begins in an interesting way not generally used in Scripture, yet one that was common for other classical Greek authors: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of

God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Lk 3.1-2). This summary of prominent world and local figures at the time that John began his ministry in the wilderness is intended to firmly place John—and in so doing, Jesus—in a solid historical context. In naming the key political and religious figures of the time, we know exactly when all this happened. We can point to a timeline and say with certainty, this is when John began his ministry. This is when Jesus began his public ministry.

As one commentator notes, in these verses “Luke situates John in both a sociopolitical and a salvation-historical context. The Roman and Jewish figures he lists speak to the universal reach of the prophetic message, but they also serve to contrast sharply those inhabiting ancient centers of power and privilege over against what is happening in the wilderness.”¹ Even though the scene is of this somewhat strange character out in the wilderness proclaiming a message to repentance, his purpose for doing so makes that wilderness spot the center of the world, if not the center of the universe.

Of the names listed in today’s Gospel, all are prominent figures, except for the last: John son of Zechariah. John the Baptist. A nobody compared to the political and religious figures listed. And even more audacious is the fact that John is the only person listed who is given divine authority. Not even Annas and Caiaphas, high priests of the Temple, are given such recognition. This is a bit ironic, since, as we’ve established, John was the son of Zechariah, a priest. The priestly class was hereditary, meaning that John would normally have become a priest, like his father. And yet, John turned his back on the established religious system in search of the truth. As one commentator notes, in starting the story of John the Baptist in this way, Luke is making a powerful claim. “Despite appearances, the real power and authority resides neither in the imperial palace nor the sacred temple, but rather in a scraggly figure, alone in the wilderness, preaching repentance. Beyond the coordinates and control of the empire—God is on the move!”²

And this move is happening one person at a time. The message that John preaches is a message of personal repentance. Not necessarily a new message. But the way he does it is new. And profoundly significant! The message itself, of repentance, had been the subject of prophetic proclamations for centuries. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, literally means “change of mind.” But it is more than just changing one’s thoughts, of adopting a new perspective. *Metanoia* really carried the connotation of a change of life. Of a thorough and ongoing shift, a complete reorientation of one’s life. And unlike other prophetic calls for repentance, John accompanied his message with ritual action. With a sacramental act, in which the action itself signified a deeper, inner change to the one participating in it. We are told that this was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk 3.3). The word Luke uses for “forgiveness” actually means “release.” The concept being that in this act, one’s sins are not just forgiven. Rather, the one baptized is being “released from sin, as if from captivity or enslavement.”³ This is a powerful image. Recognition that we are captives to our sinful behavior, that we are slaves to our sins. And that through repentance, by turning our lives around, the bonds of that enslavement are broken. We are released. We are made free.

This image is made even more powerful by John’s choice of location for proclaiming his message and performing his baptism of repentance. In the wilderness. At the Jordan River. A location in the wilderness away from most centers of population. Why such a remote location?

Couldn't John have found water a little closer to Jerusalem? Someplace where he might have been able to reach even more people? Probably. But the choice of location is significant in and of itself. Remember, the Hebrews had been enslaved in Egypt. In the Exodus from Egypt, they were liberated from slavery. Through their 40-year journey in the wilderness, they were shaped and molded into God's Chosen People. Preparing them for the Promised Land. The most significant and defining event in the history of God's Chosen People. And it was at the Jordan River where the Hebrews crossed into the Promised Land, ending their wilderness journey. Crossing the Jordan River meant they were free. They were safe. And they were now home.

In proclaiming his message in a wilderness location, John is issuing a poignant reminder of Israel's formation as God's people through the Exodus. And in so doing, he is raising hopes for the restoration of God's people through a new exodus. John is signaling that what he is doing—or rather, what the one who is coming after him, Jesus, will do—is an equally significant moment in the life of God's people. It is a fulfilling of that hope for restoration which could not be accomplished through the established religious system or structures. As one commentator so beautifully puts it:

Like a new Exodus, the people of God will emerge again from the wilderness, that hallowed place of freedom and intimacy with God; be immersed again in the Jordan River, that hallowed place of transition; and enter again the promised land. Thus the great poetic form of Exodus returns, the divine signature of salvation. And sure enough, Jesus goes on to announce his public ministry in clear terms of liberation: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me . . . to proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18).⁴

Release from what enslaves us. Release from the bonds of sin. And ultimately, through Christ's death and resurrection, release from the bonds of death. That's pretty good news. The even better news is that, according to Luke, this freedom, this liberation from the bonds of sin and death, isn't reserved for a select few. It's not just for those who went out to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. It's not just for the Jews. No, the promise is extended to every creature under heaven! In this new exodus, the exodus to which John points, the exodus of which Jesus leads the way, Luke tells us that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lk 3.6).

As the Body of Christ, as God's new Chosen People, we are called to continue proclaiming the message of John the Baptist. We are called to continue to point the way to the one whose birth we will celebrate in just three weeks. We are called to continue to point the way to the one whose Second Coming we await at the end of the ages. We are called, as Zechariah proclaimed of his son, to be prophets of the Most High. We are called to be the voices of those crying out in the wilderness of our own day, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1857-8.

² "Peace & Freedom: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Two," SALT, November 29, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/salts-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-two>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.