

Sunday, December 8, 2024
Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Malachi 3.1-6; Luke 1.68-79; Luke 3.1-6

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/8822611231109397>

(Sermon begins at about 19:30)

“Preparing the Way of the Lord”

Last week we explored a little of how during this season of Advent we move back and forth through a variety of time periods, just like time travelers in a sci-fi story might jump around exploring various points in time. A season in which we move back and forth through the timeline that comprises salvation history. In this season, we explore ancient prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and then witness how those prophecies are realized through the birth of that Messiah, through his life and ministry, through the prophecies he himself makes, and through his role in the fulfillment of salvation history. This season being a time of focusing on the various Advents, the various comings or arrivals, of Jesus into our midst. His Advent at his birth on Christmas. His Advent at the end of the ages, in what is commonly referred to as the Second Coming. And, between these two, his Advent in our day-to-day lives. All the while, watching and waiting, preparing for his arrival in all its manifestations.

The Gospel for last week focused on Jesus delivering a prophetic warning regarding the end times and instructions to his followers on how they are to respond: that they are to be attentive, to be alert. Particularly with respect to his coming at the end of the ages. Today, our Gospel takes us back in time from what we witnessed last week, to the time just before Jesus begins his public ministry. To another Advent prophecy involving the coming of the Messiah. To the fulfillment of that prophecy. Yet, in this fulfillment of prophecy, the Messiah does not actually make an appearance but is merely referenced. Rather, the primary focus today is on John the Baptist as the one who fulfills prophecy by pointing to the One who is to come. And, of course, as is emblematic of the season, there is a prophetic foretelling of John the Baptist's role in salvation history.

First, that prophecy, presented in our Old Testament reading. The prophet Malachi delivers a promise from God: “See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” He then goes on to talk about how this messenger will prepare for the Lord's coming through purification and restoration. For context, Malachi is writing roughly 500 years before Jesus. The Israelites have returned home following the Babylonian Exile. They recognized that their time in exile was punishment for not adhering to their covenantal relationship with God. Upon their return from exile, everyone was on the same page. However, it was not long before they began slipping back into their old ways. They were becoming increasingly lax in their religious and social behaviors. And frankly, the temple priests were largely to blame. They just were not doing their job at keeping the people in line with God's laws. The prophecy delivered by Malachi foretells of one who would come to purify and restore the priesthood to its rightful role. Invoking the images of refiner's fire and fullers' soap, methods of removing impurity.

As Christians looking at this prophecy, it is easy to see how John the Baptist is the messenger foretold as the one who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. One whose entire message was about repentance: turning around and returning to right relationship with God. One whose entire ministry was based on a ritualistic act of purification: baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Our response to the Old Testament reading, Canticle 16, the Song of Zechariah, provides further connection of John the Baptist to this and other ancient prophecies of a messenger sent by God to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. This canticle, found in the first chapter of Luke, records the words of Zechariah, John's father, on the day of John's circumcision eight days after his birth. Zechariah's words sing praises to God for his saving acts among the people and how he will provide ongoing salvation through the One "raised up for us as a mighty savior, born of the house of your servant David." A common description for the long-awaited Messiah. Zechariah then extols the prophets of old who foretold the coming of the Messiah and who kept the promise alive through the ages. Zechariah would have undoubtedly had Malachi's words in mind as he summarized the prophets of old.

Zechariah then moves from ancient prophecies to their fulfillment. Particularly fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Or rather, foretelling of the actual fulfillment. Foretelling of precisely how the ancient prophecies will be fulfilled in the person of his own son. Prophecy fulfilling prophecy. Now speaking directly to his newborn son, Zechariah proclaims, "You my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give God's people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." Those very words declaring precisely who John would become and how he would fulfill his sacred charge.

Fast forward about 30 years and we encounter John the Baptist now coming on the scene fulfilling the ancient prophecies, fulfilling his own father's prophecy. In the Gospel account of John beginning his ministry, we start by hearing a list of names: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas. Why do we need them? What do they have to do with John and his ministry of baptism, of his calling to "prepare the way of the Lord"?

For one, listing who were the imperial, regional, local, and religious authorities of the day firmly set the coming of John the Baptist—and by extension, Jesus—in historical context. But even more important is what this introduction says about John the Baptist himself. John is listed last in this long list of prominent figures. Names that would have been well-known at the time. John is a nobody compared with these prominent governmental and religious officials. Someone who could easily be considered insignificant.

Yet, in many ways, all the others could as easily be considered insignificant. At least in the grand scheme foretold by the prophets. After rattling off the list of prominent names, John is introduced with the words: "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah." His name is not just listed. That phrase, "the word of God came to John," indicates that of all those listed, only John is given divine authority. Employing the same formula used to introduce and describe how others before him were called to be God's prophets. The word of God came to John. Luke's intent is clear. Despite appearances and perceptions, true power and authority is not found in the imperial palace, not found in the halls of government, not even found in the temple in Jerusalem. Rather, true power is found in "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," in the one who proclaims the coming of someone far greater: the Messiah. The One heralded by

God's anointed prophet called, in the words of Malachi, in the words of Isaiah, to "prepare the way of the Lord." Heralded by none other than John the Baptist.

Consistent with the prophecy in Malachi, John's is a message of repentance, of turning around, of turning back to God. Of seeking forgiveness of sin. The word Luke uses for forgiveness actually meaning "release." The idea of being released from sin, as one is released from captivity, released from enslavement. Which is really what forgiveness of sins is about. Being released from the bond sin has on us. Being released from the ways we are enslaved to and by our sins. The way John chooses to ritualize, to symbolize, this forgiveness, this release, is through the sacramental act of baptism. A symbolic act of purification and restoration.

At that time, baptism was reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. The immersion in water signified a complete transformation of the convert. Not unlike the transformation that occurs in our own sacrament of baptism. While intended for Gentile converts, John departs from this norm. Rather, he is calling for all to undergo baptism, to undergo this needed conversion. Not just Gentiles, but also Jews. Recognizing, as indicated in the prophecy of Malachi, the need for all to seek forgiveness, to seek repentance, and to turn back to God. To seek a new way of life of submission and allegiance to God.

The symbolism of entering a new life free from sin is further emphasized by John's choice of location for his ministry of baptism. The Jordan River. At first glance it seems an odd choice. After all, it was in the wilderness. Not exactly easy to get to. Not located near major population centers, such as Jerusalem. Yet, the place itself is significant in the lives of the Jewish people. Lending further significance to baptism as a transition, as a transformation. During the Exodus, at the end of their forty-year wandering in the wilderness, the Hebrews finally reached the Promised Land. To enter this Promised Land, their new home, they had to cross the Jordan River. This made the Jordan River a sacred place of transition. A transition from their old life of slavery in a foreign land to a new life of freedom in their own land. The act of baptism John offered was another transition. Coming out of the waters of baptism in the Jordan River, those who were baptized crossed into a new way of life. One also characterized by freedom. Freedom from the bonds of sin, just as their Hebrew ancestors were freed from the bonds of slavery. A freedom in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Today we again traveled back in time and heard of ancient prophecies of the arrival of one who would prepare for the coming of the Lord into our midst. We heard Zechariah's prophecy of how that would be accomplished through his son John the Baptist. We heard how he fulfilled those prophecies in his own day, preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness; a message of freedom and new life. All in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. In our own day, in this season of Advent, we continue to await the coming of the Messiah. To celebrate the Messiah who has come into the world in Jesus Christ. To continue to anticipate his coming again at the end of the ages. To continue to be open to those ways in which he comes to us in our day-to-day lives. As we continue to wait in anticipation, let us prepare by heeding John's call to repent and turn our lives away from whatever might distract us from our relationship with God. Let us heed John's call to turn toward a new life of freedom. In so doing, may we too become voices of those who cry out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord."