



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 12, 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*
on
Luke 3:7-18
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The Calling of John

“O Generation of Vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

What a way to begin a sermon, John! Not “Dearly Beloved,” or “Friends, Romans, Countrymen.” Nothing like that. Instead its: “You poisonous snakes, who now cower in the grass, who told you to slither my way?” That’s bold. I couldn’t imagine saying anything like *that* before a baptism here, to a mother cradling her newborn. There is no pastoral way to say “you brood of vipers,” especially in a moment like that. Then again, I’m no prophet. I am decidedly a priest, one with a different skill set.

You know, John could have been a priest if he wanted. His father, Zechariah, was a priest in the Temple. Both his father and his mother, Elizabeth, were descended from Aaron, Moses’ big brother and the first High Priest. John’s birth was miraculous, sensational even. His mother bore him far later than should have been possible, much like the matriarch, Sarah, in the Torah. And John’s name was given by an Archangel, announced to his father while he ministered at a Temple altar. What better pedigree to be a priest, or even High Priest?

But John answered a different sort of call from God. A ministry that would lead him away from the Temple precincts, and God’s Holy City, out into a place of great danger, the desert wilderness. He became gaunt and let his beard grow untrimmed. Far from the diet of a well-fed, clean-cut priest, he lived on locusts and wild honey. And his only vestments were camel’s hair and a leather girdle. His life became rugged, austere, and fearless, but no less structured or symbolic, for in his speech and comportment he was completely of the tradition of the nomadic prophets.

He had both the traditional appearance and the integrity necessary to make himself heard and taken seriously.

By many accounts, the voice of prophecy had not been heard in Israel for a long time. Amidst the tragedies of occupation and the splendor of Herod’s temple, so much of the relationship of a living god to living people was getting lost. Righteous law and ethics abounded, but the spirit of the Torah was slowly but surely being turned into a handbook of religious administration. And so, there was not only rebellion against Roman domination and insidious influence, but also rebellion against the corruption of their own leadership and all the intricate reasonings about the law which made it near impossible to be religious in the terms demanded by religious people. And so the number of people under the category of “sinners” was only growing.

John the Baptist came to such a world as this, a society on edge and raw, poised either to be set afire by their enemies or to crumble through their own divisions and misplaced judgments. He insisted that his only function was that of a road-builder, to prepare the way of the Lord's coming. Now, this is another way of his saying that God was absent. A bold thing for the child of a priest to say, when the Temple his father served was primarily set up to be a home for the presence of the Lord. Instead, what John is saying is that God isn't there and he needs to return, because if he were here, things wouldn't be so broken and poisonous.

As a road-builder, his message was rough and direct: repent and do the best you can. This message came as no shock to the tax collectors, the soldiers, and the sinners. But it was a terrible blow to the religious. Many of them believed themselves to be saved because of their pedigree, because they were part of God's ancient chosen people. They were the children of Abraham, after all. But John would have none of this. God could create children of Abraham anytime he wanted, even out of the stones and rocks of the desert. God was not focused on who they were, but what they did. Did they act like good people? Like those who are seeking to do what God wants? If they were like a well-planted tree, rather than a bunch of snakes, were they bearing fruit that anyone would want to eat?

If not, well, as John preached, it didn't matter if you were children of Abraham or children of angels, if your branches didn't produce, you would be cut down and burned up. The time was short, and God is coming, and on that day, he preached, the fruitless will burn in a fire that never ends.

And so, in the meantime, John called the people of God to a renewed way of life, to do things that demonstrated that they were committed to God, to bear fruit worthy of repentance. He told them to share their possessions with one another, to not exploit one another by charging more than what is justly due, to do violence to no one, to make no false accusations, and to be content with one's wages.

And the sign of that repentance would be the ceremony of baptism. Repentance was the characteristic feature of John's baptism, for ritual purification or bathing at the Temple or in one's regular life did not necessarily involve repentance. But John's baptism was explicitly about an internal shift, a turning of the heart and the will, a spiritual renewal for anyone who would come to the water, both the clean and the unclean.

But John was not merely encouraging personal renewal, his baptism was very much about communal renewal of the people of Israel. For look where he baptized, not just any desert oasis, but a particularly pivotal location on the eastern boundary of Judea, the marshy bank of Bethabara, or Bethany beyond the Jordan.

This is not only the place where one could witness the first light dawn upon God's country. But it is also the very place where, long ago, Joshua led their people with the Ark of the Covenant into the Promised Land for the first time. The very place where God parted waters, as he had done for Moses, so that Joshua and the Israelites could cross the Jordan to claim their new home and to become the nation God had intended them to be. It is also the very spot where waters had parted for the great prophet Elijah, who crossed on dry land to the Judean side with his successor, Elisha, promptly ascending to heaven on a chariot of fire. If that wasn't enough, it is also the region through which the Jews had returned from their captivity and exile in eastern Babylon.

So when John led people into the waters of Jordan river at that place and in that direction (the baptism could have even involve wading all the way across into the Holy Land) no matter how far across a person would have gone, it is very much a ceremonial reenactment of their nation's birth. Also a kind of reenactment of their return from exile. The implication is that they are indeed in a very dark place, things are so bad that even though they are living in the Holy Land, they are in the place they belong, they are still in captivity and exile, and John's solution is, through baptism, to leave and come back, to repossess the land as a consecrated people, not as a tangled mass of poisonous serpents, but as a garden full of trees bearing good fruit.

John's call was very compelling. Many people agreed with his take on how bad things had gotten, their "exile-in-place", and they joined him in the wilderness to be baptized as a public sign of repentance and to repossess the land that was theirs. If people were so united as the true Israel by the prophetic symbolism of John's baptism, Herod Antipas the ruler on the eastern bank, he had every reason to fear the consequences from this new Joshua. Fearing sedition, he made a preemptive strike before John could instigate an uprising. Hence John's imprisonment, then needless execution.

But John, he made it clear that he did not think his ministry was the ultimate one. His baptism was the preface for another far more intense and thorough cleansing by the power of the divine and some sort of fire. He didn't confuse himself with the Messiah, or the coming of the Lord, but he prepared the way for him. And without knowing it, perhaps, fully at the time, he would witness and even facilitate the coming of the Christ across the Jordan, indeed his cousin from Nazareth, one actually named Joshua, we know him as Jesus.

In one of the baptisms that he officiated, he would make way for the path of the Savior to reenact that return across the river Jordan into the Promised Land.

As John was herald to the first Coming, so the Church is to be the herald for the Second Coming. Like John, our task is to prepare the world, maybe even the whole cosmos for its final transfiguration when Christ shall come again and God shall be all in all. To that end, we can speak the truth as he spoke it, and patiently suffer for truth's sake as he did, but we need not rehearse John's grim forebodings.

Unlike John, we have no question in our heart as to who it is who shall come, nor are we in suspense as to what that One is like. We the Church can celebrate with full-throated Joy this morning for, we know with William Blake, that "Mercy has a human heart; Pity, a human face; and Love, the human form divine: and Peace the human dress."

We know very well who is coming at that great rose-colored dawn, our true Judge, yes, and also our truest Friend. Come, Lord Jesus.