

2nd SUNDAY of ADVENT

December 5, 2021

COLLECT: MERCIFUL GOD, who sent your messengers, the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

THE LESSONS: First Reading: Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4

Canticles: 4 or 16: The Song of Zechariah

Second Reading: Philippians 1:3-11

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

THE SERMON: Welcome to Second Sunday of Advent, our altar colors are now blue and the altar flowers have a special significance for me. They were created by a parishioner at Holy Spirit Episcopal Church, Bullhead City, Arizona. There I am the Priest-In-Charge on the 2nd and 4th Sundays. Of course, here at St. Matthew's, I am Priest and I celebrate on the 1st, 3rd and 5th Sunday. I asked Patricia Crudele to create a floral arrangement for Advent. This arrangement is a sermon within itself. The weeds and stems represent the area along the Jordan River where John the Baptist preached and baptized. The lights within the arrangement represent the appearance or coming of Christ.

Affectionately I call this the John the Baptist Weeds flowers/arrangement.

This is really what the 2nd Sunday is about. It is about John the Baptist.

In our first reading of Baruch, the prophet has a message for the people of Jerusalem who are suffering during the Babylonian exile. In a vision, God

has told the prophet to tell people to take off their garments of sorrow and affliction. They are to put on forever the robe of righteousness and the beauty of the glory of God. God will bring back the people of Israel from exile to Jerusalem and lead them in joy, the light of glory, mercy and righteousness. God has ordered that every high mountain and all the hills be made low and the valleys filled up to make level ground so that nothing interferes with the Israelites returning to Jerusalem and the glory of God.

There is a similar message given to the prophet Isaiah; it too deals with the ending of the exile in Babylon.

His message is about one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare a road for the Lord through the wilderness, clear a highway across the desert for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill shall be brought down, rugged places shall be made smooth. Then shall the glory of the Lord be revealed. And all mankind together shall see it.”

Now who is this voice crying in the wilderness telling the people of Israel to rejoice for their days of exile will soon be over and there will be nothing that stops them from experiencing the glory of God.

The answer is found in today’s first lesson, the Gospel of Luke.

The priest Zechariah has gone into the holiest place in the temple to light the incense on the altar. While there, he is startled by God’s messenger, the angel Gabriel. Gabriel tells him not to be afraid, that God has heard their prayers and, although they are beyond child bearing age, his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son, whose name would be John.

Gabriel told Zechariah that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit and he would bring many people back to the Lord their God. He would be a fore

runner to the coming of the Lord and have power to reconcile father and child. He would convert the rebellious to righteous and prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

John was indeed born and in Canticles 4 and 14, I can imagine Zachariah looking at John as he held him in his arms repeating the prophesy the angel Gabriell had spoken to him. He said. "You my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way."

John was filled with the Holy Spirit and lived an ascetic life. He didn't drink wine or other strong drink. He wore animal skins and is believed to have lived and studied with the Qumrans, a group that lived along the Jordan River and were devoted to prayer and study. They kept separate from and lived monastic like.

John the Baptist proclaimed that people repent, change the way they were living. They should be baptized and cleansed of their sins. He also preached that there was one coming after him who was mightier and who would bring salvation.

John would baptize Jesus in the Jordan River and here the voice of God say, "This is my Son the beloved in whom I am well pleased." At the same time, John witnessed the Holy Spirit come down from heaven, like a dove, landing on Jesus.

John the Baptist was indeed the voice crying in the wilderness, and did prepare people for the coming of the Lord. Amen

Rev. Lionel Starkes

