

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Second Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2009
Luke 3:1-14

“The Prophet’s Task”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

John the Baptist plays a role in this and next week’s Gospel lessons in this year’s series of readings. This week relates the beginning of his work, next week we see him at the close of his ministry. In the verses before us today we will see John’s ministry placed in its historical context and also see his identification as the last prophet in the manner of the Old Testament era. Then in the words of the theme for today we will learn of The Prophets Task and see its value for our time as well as we prepare and get ready for the Lord’s coming not just in these weeks leading up to Christmas but in all of our life.

I. The Historical Link

Nowhere else in the Gospel of St. Luke does the Evangelist go to the detail he does here of pinning down the time of an event. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas ...” If the listing of all these names should do nothing else for us, it should remind us of the fact that the events of our salvation took place in the midst of real people in historical time. The emperor Tiberius began his sole reign at the death of Caesar Augustus on August 19, 14 A.D. So the 15th year of Tiberius would put the date for the beginning of John’s ministry at around 29 A.D. With some of the new work that has been done with the chronology of the Bible this date figures in pretty well with the information we have about the time of Jesus’ birth and his age of around 30 when he began his ministry.

The other rulers in the secular sphere listed are the “tetrarchs” a term which means ruler of a “one-fourth part.” Herod the Great’s kingdom was divided up into four parts at his death. Thus Herod Antipas, his brother Philip, and Lysanias were all tetrarchs, and Pilate, the governor ruled the other fourth part. By the way, Pontius Pilate became governor of Judea in 26 A.D. The rule in the religious realm belonged to that of Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas, who though no longer high priest exercised great influence and may very well have been considered high priest by the Jews for they did not believe a high priest could be deposed from office. In this time and setting the great work of salvation would take place for “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son ...”

II. The Prophetic Call

In this time, a very important thing happened which is stated in just a few simple words. Luke writes, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Now it is

clear from these words that the Lord called John to his work. But what needs to be understood is the task to which John is called. To understand this one needs to look at the opening verse of the prophecy of Jeremiah in the Greek version. For there the identical words are used for the call of Jeremiah-- "The word of God which came to Jeremiah, son of Hilkiyah ..." (Jeremiah 1:1) And very similar words are used at the beginning of other prophetic books in the Old Testament. Hosea 1:1 "The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beerai ..." Joel 1:1 "The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel." Jonah 1:1 "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai." Micah 1:1 "The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth ..." Zephaniah 1:1: "The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi ..." Haggai 1:1 "... The word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel ..." Zechariah 1:1 "... The word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah ..."

From these examples it is clear that John the Baptist was called by the Lord to be a prophet. And had not his father said the very thing in his song of praise at his son's birth: "You my child will be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare His way ..." (Luke 1:76) John the Baptist stood at the end of the long line of prophets who had served the Lord in the ages previous. These are the prophets who fearlessly and steadfastly spoke the word of the Lord to the people, calling them to repentance, warning of the wrath of the Lord, and offering hope in the promise still to come. Though there had been a prophetic silence for centuries, John is now the last of that group and it is his turn to speak. For as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us: "In many and various ways God spoke to His people of old through the prophets but now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son." (Hebrews 1:1) John stands at the crucial time in history--his task is of the greatest importance for John must prepare the way.

III. The Prophet's Task

As the Gospel lesson continues: "He went into all the country around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." His work in the wilderness of Judea was to call people to repentance. His baptism was indeed a means of grace for it offered the forgiveness of sins. As a preparatory rite to the baptism which Jesus would institute it called people into a proper relationship with God. But this preaching and baptizing were all a part of the greater task of John. That task is described by St. Luke as he quotes the familiar words of the prophecy of Isaiah, words which are quoted by all four evangelists in their Gospels: "A voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low ... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Prepare the way. Make ready. The message is for everyone to hear.

In ancient times, a herald would appear many weeks or even months before the arrival of a king or other great official in a town. That would give time for the preparations to take place. The city would be spruced up, the roads repaired. Everything would be in readiness.

We do much the same thing when expecting out of town company. We dust the shelves, vacuum the carpets. Polish the furniture. All those little things are probably going on right now in your lives or in the lives of people you know as you get ready for the celebrations of the coming weeks.

But what preparation must there be for the Lord himself. For John the Baptist is not preparing the way for an earthly king. He is preparing the way for the Lord. In the Old Testament lesson for today, from the book of Malachi, we have the same thoughts, perhaps more directly stated. "Behold, I send my messenger, who will prepare the way before Me." Here the Lord himself speaks. The messenger is His. The preparation is for the Lord himself. "For suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come." (Malachi 3:1-2) In that preparation even the hills will be levelled and the mountains lowered. The valleys will be filled and the curves straightened. The rough places will be smoothed out. "And all mankind will see God's salvation." This is not a task to be performed by human hands alone. God himself has a hand in the preparation for his coming. John the Baptist was that messenger to prepare the way. He truly had "The Prophets Task."

IV. An Application for Today

And what of us today on this Second Sunday in Advent. You could all probably list the things that still need to be done. There are after all including today, 18 shopping days left until Christmas. But in the midst of all the rushing around, remember this. The real preparation is of the heart. The real joy is that the Lord who has come has come to save us in spite of ourselves. He saves us from our sin. The preparation of Advent is to open our hearts again to that great good news. Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Yes he has come in the historical world of Tiberius Caesar and Herod and Pilate. He comes as well in the words of his Word as he speaks to us. He comes in the waters of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He comes with his own body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. And He will come again in glory. Those are the Advent hopes. Those are the source of our joy. In the epistle lesson for this day, St. Paul writes: "And this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:9-11) What a prayer of comfort that is. For we are filled with the fruits of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ by his grace and mercy. In that we are prepared for Advent, for Christmas, for eternity. For his grace strengthens us.

Redeemer, come, I open wide
My heart to Thee; here Lord abide
Let me thy inner presence feel
Thy grace and love in me reveal;
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on
Until our glorious goal is won.

Eternal praise and fame
We offer to Thy name.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.