

The Rev'd Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
6<sup>th</sup> December 2009  
Advent 2  
Baruch 5:1-9  
Luke 3:1-6

Song of Zechariah

Philippians 1:1-11

“Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time runs forward. All time, both history and in personal life, is expectation. Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal.”<sup>1</sup>

It's important when we read the Bible to look at the context; we are working today with historical events, but the writers and our lectionary gatherers sometimes turn them topsy turvy – something like what we do in the celebration of the Eucharist, and something like what God does in his covenant with us – but I'll get to that in a moment.

First, Baruch. In the sixth century BC Israel was exiled from Jerusalem, and sent as slaves to Babylon. There they stayed from anywhere from seventy years to seven generations. Then Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return. It seems that Baruch may have actually been written *after* these historical events, yet in today's reading, the prophet is writing about something that is about to happen: “Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east...rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot,...but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne.”

This is really a song of rejoicing. By predicting that something is *going* to happen, which Israel knew had *already* happened, Baruch gives us a self-fulfilled prophecy. It's like if I said to you right now: Behold, City of Mt. Pleasant, you will see snow fall upon the branches and the earth will turn white. And this shall come before the Second Sunday of Advent.

And now the Gospel of Luke. The creators of our lectionary have played a bit loosey-goosey with time. They give us this reading, from the third chapter of Luke, and it really sounds like an Advent reading, as if it is announcing the birth of our Lord – but it's not! This reading, placed so specifically in time (the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor of Tiberius) and place (the region of the Jordan), is the adult John the Baptist announcing the coming of the adult Jesus: all flesh shall see the salvation of God. And I've looked through the lectionary and can't find any Sunday in the three year cycle where we're given the prelude, the preliminary Lukan writings about John the Baptist. So I say to the lectionary writers: couldn't you have given us at least a *hint* who this guy is?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. O'Gorman. *An Advent Sourcebook*. Chicago: The Archdiocese of Chicago, 1988, p. 5.

So I'm going to give *you* a bit of a hint giving you some background. In the first chapter of Luke, we read that there's a priest, Zechariah, who had a wife, Elizabeth (and by the way, Elizabeth happens to be a cousin of Mary). Although they are both righteous, they have no children: Elizabeth is barren, and they're getting on in years.

One day when Zechariah was worshipping and burning incense, the angel Gabriel, yes, the same one who's going to appear to Mary in another chapter, appears to Zechariah, terrifying the devil out of him. Well, angels aren't exactly commonplace – wouldn't you be a little startled? Unless she looked like Della Reese, that is. And this angel is male. Anyway, Gabriel says to Zechariah that Elizabeth is going to bear a son, and his name will be John. Zechariah doubts the angel, and for that doubt, Mister Angel zaps Zechariah and makes him mute: There's a wonderful line, when Zechariah expresses his doubt: The angel said, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God." As if: "Don't doubt me, buddy, I'm not some little cherub. I know things."

So Elizabeth conceives, Zechariah is mute, and the neighbors rejoice. John is born and they take him to the temple for his circumcision and Zechariah writes on a tablet, "His name is John." "And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God."

And Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke a prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David [that's Jesus, who hasn't even been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit or born of the Virgin Mary yet]...And you, child [that's the baby John] will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord [that's Jesus] to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

This is the canticle we chanted after the reading from Baruch.

And then Luke kind of files John away for a while and deals with the birth of Jesus, which we're not going to hear about for a few weeks. All of this has happened *before* today's reading, and yet here's John today, already on the second Sunday of Advent, fulfilling his father's prophecy.

And so we have prophecy and fulfillment, the years about 1 and 30 or so, an infant and an adult, announcing the coming of the infant Jesus and the Savior adult Jesus. And God asks us to enter into this time, to suspend our notions of clocks and calendars to become part of the story. That's what Advent is: Becoming part of the story by heeding John's words about repentance, priestly

cautions about confession and reflection. Wait for the coming of the one who has already come and is about to be born, the paradox of holiness.

As I've mentioned from time to time church often uses odd words for simple things: chalice for wine goblet. Paten for bread plate. Corporal for placemat. Nave for room with peaked ceiling. Narthex for vestibule or entry.

And we often use odd words for complex things: *anaphora* for the ordering of the Eucharist. *Epiclesis* for the intercession that God send the Holy Spirit to change for us the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. And there's a word that really has no exact translation, *anamnesis* — and I want to talk about that for a moment, because I think it carries the essence of Advent — how we are supposed to approach the coming of the Christ child, how we are supposed to live into this suspended time.

"Memorial, commemoration, remembrance — all these words suggest that the person or deed commemorated is past and absent, but *anamnesis* signifies exactly the opposite: it is an act, in and by which the person or event commemorated is actually made present, is brought into the realm of the here and now. The Eucharist...is the recalling before God of the one sacrifice of Christ in all its accomplished fullness so that it is here and now operative by its effects in the souls of the redeemed."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, when I'm at the Altar, I am doing more than telling you the story of what Jesus did at the Last Supper: I, with you, have a conversation with God, thanking him for his goodness and mercy, and after we sing the *Sanctus* we have the words of institution, the story. But again — it's not just a story, not just a recalling of an event, it is an entering into the story, calling for Christ's presence here again among us, and we enter the story by participating in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the bread and wine, the body and blood of our Lord. That's what *anamnesis* is.

I think *anamnesis* is what Advent is. By reading the prophecy of the Old Testament, by hearing the words spoken by the Baptizer, by looking both forward and backward, we're asking the story to let us step inside just for a moment, becoming one *with* the story.

For when we hear the words of John the Baptist, we're not just hearing a story about a bunch of Jewish people who were listening to the ravings of a crazed man dressed in camel skins and eating locusts for breakfast. We're hearing the

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<sup>2</sup> J.G.Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986, p. 18.

prophecy of his father fulfilled, the prophecy that John has come to prepare the way for the coming Savior. We move that to *before* the birth of Jesus because we are called to prepare ourselves for the one who is to be born. Entering into the story. *Anamnesis*.

Luke is giving us a wonderful vision, the fulfillment of the prophecy of John's father, which is the retelling of the prophecy of Isaiah, which is the retelling of the prophecy of Baruch: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Time twisting back and forth like a helix, stretching our minds to the paradox that Christ who is to be born has been born, the Christ who is to come has existed for all time, bound to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit by the unbreakable threads of mutual love.

Advent, Christmas – they become less of an event, more of a process. They become moments of eternity on our earthly calendar and in our limited imaginations. But if we can enter into the story...become the peasants listening to John, hear his father's prophecy, enter into the room where Gabriel will soon encounter a poor virgin girl named Mary... then the reality begins to unfold around us. It's not just a historical event we're anticipating, but a spiritual one of timelessness.

We enter into a celebration, to be sure, a birthday for the Christ child, a recalling of a historical event. But the spiritual process, whereby we become part of that event – *that* is the magic, the mystery of this season.

And so I suggest to you: Reflect on John's words today. Reflect on your own lives and how crooked our own paths really are. Live into the mystery of a God who will straighten them out, and look for the time when all flesh shall see the salvation of God. The mystery stays on...the story is to be continued. For all time, and until the end of time.

Amen.