

ADVENT II

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight." Mark 1:1

Oh happy day! We have the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, which is my favorite gospel: spare, incisive, filled with movement and mystery. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Surely, there's no other opening quite like this in the literature of the world. Mark's is the oldest Gospel, the original, the good news delivered with economy and in haste.

And we have John the Baptizer, one of my favorite characters, not only in the bible, but in the world. Like Mark's gospel, the Baptizer is unique, stripped down, urgent, eccentric. And lonely— or at least, alone, isolated, crying out in the wilderness. And brave, insightful, challenging, persistent— all qualities I admire and try to emulate.

And then, in the trinity of delights, we welcome Mabel Adele Gallagher into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism— an event all of us at St. John's cherish every time it comes around.

So, the Baptizer, and baptism. What can we say about them together? Well, first, although I say that the Baptizer is unique, he also belongs to a long and venerable tradition of prophets, extending back from his time and forward into the present. Isaiah, from whom we heard a few moments ago, and Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – the major prophets of Hebrew Scripture, along with the minors – Micah, Amos, Joel, and so forth. Mohammad was a prophet, and other traditions claim their own as well. And in recent times we can think of Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, and maybe even a contemporary man of controversy, Jeremiah Wright.

Prophets are not fortune -tellers. They don't simply peer into the future and predict what's going to happen – what may or may not happen. Rather, they look deeply into the present— the present state of the society around them. They describe what they see: the social ills, the injustice; and they proclaim the consequences of our behavior if we don't correct our misbegotten ways.

Prophets sometimes claim to be channeling God's word directly, or have that claim made for them. The oracles of the prophets in Hebrew Scripture appear as such received pronouncements, and The Koran purports to be a record of the exact words revealed by God through the Angel Gabriel to the Muhammad. We may understand these utterances somewhat less literally— as the profound insights of holy men and women about the heart and mind of God. In any event, we value the words and lives of the prophets as leading us deeper into God's hopes for us, and God's promise.

I often portray the Baptizer as fierce, weird, and wild. And some of his predecessors and successor share those qualities as well. In other versions of John's first appearance, he calls his followers a *brood of vipers* and tells them to repent. He wears camel's hair, and eats locusts and wild honey. Eventually he meets his doom by calling down judgment upon Herod. He was probably not the easiest guy to be around, not cozy at all. And then, not so long ago, we have Jeremiah Wright, with his *God damn America*. Also not cozy. The prophets are not noted, first and foremost, for making us comfortable and contented with ourselves.

But at the same time, prophets give us something we need. Crowds are following John around in the wilderness – well, probably not so much, the wilderness is perhaps more symbolic than geographical in the Gospel landscape. Nonetheless, John is sought after, despite his harsh words and odd demeanor. And the Reverend Wright, by all accounts, had and has a large and loyal following. I think as well of a very popular and renowned preacher earlier in our country's history, Jonathan Edwards, with his famous sermon known as “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

All of these, and so many other prophets, are remarkable for sustaining large movements while offering a steady diet of *hard sayings*. They give their followers something they need, even if that diet may be as tough to digest, sometimes, as locusts.

And that's where, to me, baptism comes in. Why get baptized? What does it mean? Why do so many young parents return to church with the motivation of having their children baptized? With all the competing demands our busy lives place upon us, why do this?

Here are the questions we answer for our children in the sacrament of baptism.

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in Christ's grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey Christ as your Lord?

What does it mean that we commit our children to these awesome responsibilities – commitments that will, if we and they even attempt to honor them, will not prove comfortable or easy in any respect?

The answers to these questions will be many and varied, and will ultimately be as mysterious as the characters of the prophets, as mysterious as the workings of the sacrament of baptism itself. But the overarching answer, I believe, is that baptism gives us something that we need. And when we offer our children up to God in the sacrament of God, we do it in the faith and hope that we are giving them something that they need.

We are giving them the reminder– if it is ever needed, that life is not always easy, comfortable, that our paths are no more straight than is God's. We are investing them with the understanding that our human world is a broken place and that we are called to work with God in fixing what is broken, to help in ushering in the realm of God's justice, equality, peace, and mercy.

Moreover, we are inviting them into a community of the faithful all of whom have made the same promises, all of whom share the same commitments. In exchange for their promises to *proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving neighbor as self, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being*, we renew our own promises and pledge to be with them as they live out their own callings in Christ.

I said earlier that the Baptizer is a lonely figure but really, in the great scheme of things, he is not. He joins the heavenly host, the vast communion of saints who serve God with loving faithfulness throughout the ages. Into that communion, with great joy and celebration, let us now welcome Mabel Adele Gallagher.

Amen.