

To Greet with Joy

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021

Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Sermon text: 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 for ever. *Amen. Collect for Advent 2, BCP 211*

This is an **apology** : “I was wrong, utterly and completely; I have no excuse; I can only ask for your forgiveness; I will do my best to make amends now and promise to do better in the future.” This what I said (in a more stammering and awkward fashion) to Mrs Moran after driving into her hedge on my first attempt at driving long ago.

And then there is an **apologia**.

An apologia in the classic sense is a defense, usually a defense of Christian doctrine—there is whole branch of theology called apologetics—that aims to remove barriers to faith, to overcome doubts and answer questions with reasonable grounds for belief.

I think we could use an apologetics of the spirit, less a defense of the reasonableness of Christian doctrines and more a look into how we can remove barriers to joy and peace in our inner selves, in our hearts.

A clearing of the ground, a preparing of the way. And Advent is the right time to do such work. As Baruch echoing Isaiah prophesied, and John the Baptist came to proclaim, we are in a time of preparation, when the lofty mountains of pride and idolatry might be lowered and the valleys of poverty and despair might be lifted so that all Israel, and indeed flesh can walk safely in the glory of God

Advent is a time when we as Christians anxious about the coming of the day judgment, the day of Christ, might feel free, forgiven and embraced by God-s love—in a word saved— so that, as Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

And so, as I did last week, I would like to preach on the collect for this Sunday, the opening prayer that sets a theme for this second Sunday of Advent, preparing the way through repentance: 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 for ever. *Amen.*

Now the collect speaks of the warnings of prophets—we ought to heed them. We do need to repent for our sins and amend our ways. But prophets also make promises in the name of God. These are two roles of the prophet, to afflict the comfortable—prophesying ruin if ways of idolatry and injustice persist (remember Amos chapter 5 a couple of weeks back)—and to comfort the afflicted—as in today's reading from Baruch 5—very much echoing Isaiah 40 and the cry of comfort, comfort my people. They have served their time of exile and sorrow—they have sown the tears of repentance—now God promises them to bring them in joy back into the light of God's glory.

So what are the obstacles to fulfilling God's promise of a joyful homecoming, or in Advent terms, a joyful greeting of the day of the Lord—whether that comes in this life or after our death when we stand before Christ the great judge of humanity and see ourselves clearly and completely for the first time in the full light of truth.

Two obstacles that come to mind are sin and fear. In the Old Testament I see a big emphasis on the two sins of idolatry—worship of false gods (lots of that still around), and injustice (see again the prophets). In the gospels we see Jesus add hypocrisy to the list—not matching actions to words, saying you believe in God but not acting according to God's commandments. We don't have to look far for examples of injustice and idolatry—and perhaps we need only look at our checkbooks, calendars and relationships to see if our lives line up with our professed values. And here the image of the day of judgment sounds a bit like an audit: ok, Jesus says, let's take a look at your life and your heart. How is the love of God and neighbor and the stewardship of earth and gifts the spirit gave you manifest in your life?

And you don't have to wait until the day of judgment to repent. You can do this at home, even daily. In the Ignatian tradition it is called doing an examen, a self-examination of the day's events in the light of your intentions.

But we can take a closer look at this sort of thing in Lent; and we will have an Ignatian workshop that provides some useful tools for self-examination.

Now, in this season, as we prepare the way, clear the ground, let me ask the question, what is stopping you from being free, joyful, hopeful?

Sin as bondage—we have touched on—both personally and socially. The answer here is to resist, praying for God's grace to assist our weak wills. And to make the conscious choice—as we do in baptism—to turn from evil and sin and turn to God and Jesus. As we put it in last week's collect: to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Repentance is literally turning around from self-seeking and sin to God and self-giving, that is love. Be honest and do the job right. Stop those acts of injustice—as John told the policeman, do not threaten false witness or ask for bribes but be satisfied with your wages. Do another he said, if you have two coats, share one; be generous. And here is the beautiful thing: God has promised to forgive your sins if you repent. And what does forgiveness mean but freedom. You are no longer bound by your past. You are free to live the life God has called you to.

But fear might still be stopping you from really moving into joy and peace. Fear of death or suffering, fear of poverty or social censure. But trust in God. Move into the life you believe the Holy Spirit is calling you. Be more generous and self-giving. You may not have as much money—but you will have enough—you may find that you are called to volunteer and give your time—but that time will be richly rewarding in terms of relationships.

So clear out the obstacles in your heart to joy and peace. Resist the evils and idols of injustice and cultural captivity in the world. Prepare for the feast. For the day of Christ. For the glory of God. Which is none other than the fulfillment of the promises made by the prophets.

And remember: : you are beloved. Embrace the future with courage and hope. As Baruch said, “Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on the forever the beauty of the glory of God.” You are beloved; your life—as indeed all creatures of God—is sacred. Put on the robe of righteousness and the diadem of glory. And God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. You look good!

In the name of christ, Amen.

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