

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019
The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Isaiah 11:1–10; Psalm 72:1–8; Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12

Luke gives us the story of John the Baptist’s annunciation to John’s father Zechariah¹ and the story of Mary’s visit to John’s mother Elizabeth when both women are with child.² We don’t hear anything else in Luke, or in any of the other gospels, about John the Baptist until he is an adult, in the wilderness, preaching and baptizing.

The author of the fourth gospel, unlike Matthew and Luke, did not use a written copy of Mark’s gospel as a starting point.³ But the author shared “pre-Gospel traditions, oral and written” and was familiar with material known to Luke.⁴ So, in the first chapter of John, after the evangelist’s proclamation that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,”⁵ the evangelist writes, “John bore witness to him, and cried, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks

¹ Luke 1:5–25.

² Luke 1:39–56.

³ See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 364–65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁵ John 1:14.

before me, for he was before me.”⁶—in the gospel according to John, the Baptist is simply “John”—which suggests to me that the evangelist himself did not want his name to be known or that the evangelist’s name was not John.

In the fourth gospel, John—the Baptist—himself is asked if he is a prophet. He responds, “No.” When “priests and Levites”⁷ insist on knowing who he is and what he’s about, John replies, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”⁸ And John tells them, “Among you is one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”⁹ The next day, twice John will see Jesus and say to John’s own disciples, “Behold the Lamb of God!”¹⁰—but John and Jesus do not meet at all in this gospel—no baptism for Jesus in the gospel according to the evangelist tradition calls John.

Now it’s only in this gospel that we learn that “Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there

⁶ John 1:15.

⁷ John 1:19.

⁸ John 1:23. Translation: Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 48.

⁹ John 1:26b.

¹⁰ 1:29, 36b.

[Jesus] remained with them and baptized.”¹¹ A few verses later, the evangelist will tell us that “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John—the Baptist.”¹² But at a very early date, for whatever reason, a parenthetical comment was added to this verse, “(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples).”¹³ Count me among those who think that the evangelist’s community thought that Jesus himself did baptize. The evangelist also tells us that the Baptist was imprisoned,¹⁴ but nothing more about his life or his death.

Mark’s good news about Jesus begins with words from the prophet Isaiah, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”¹⁵ John the Baptist does this, yet it’s worth remembering that Isaiah the prophet was told by God, “Comfort, comfort my people . . . Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.”¹⁶ In Mark, John seems simply humble. But it’s Matthew and Luke that share the source for John saying, in Matthew to Pharisees and

¹¹ John 3:22.

¹² John 4:1.

¹³ John 4:2.

¹⁴ John 3:24.

¹⁵ Isaiah 40:3.

¹⁶ Isaiah 40:1–2a.

Sadducees, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?,”¹⁷ and in Luke, the same words addressed, not just to priests and Levites, but “to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by [John].”¹⁸ In both gospels, John continues, “God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”¹⁹

Dr. Mark Davis, in his commentary on today’s gospel lesson, remarks on John’s warning about an axe being ready to cut down trees that do not bear fruit, writes, “The space between life and death is a thin place through which God can pass freely.”²⁰ I stopped when I read those words. They took me to words of a collect in the burial service that begins, “O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we pray, deeply aware of the shortness and uncertainty of human life; and let your Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days.”²¹

¹⁷ Matthew 3:7.

¹⁸ Luke 3:7a.

¹⁹ Matthew 3:9b; Luke 3:8b.

²⁰ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2016-12-04T13:30:00-08:00&max-results=1&reverse-paginate=true&start=5&by-date=false>, (accessed 4 December 2016—I think Dr. Davis is on vacation, because he did not publish an update.)

²¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 504.

I think we can see in the ministry of John the Baptist the hand of God. He was the prophet of the transformation of relationship between God and God's people by the birth of God's Son. We can also see that suffering can come in the lives of those who follow God, who believe in God's Son. Jesus of Nazareth. I remind myself and you that the words about John the Baptist bespeak Jesus' own journey to Jerusalem, where he too will be imprisoned and suffer.

For some Sundays during this year, I am working with a five-year-old boy in our temporary atrium space—the regular space is given over to organ pipes. It's Montessori based. The program is called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The first religious presentation given to a three- to six-year-old children is called "Altar I." There's a small table, a white cloth, two candles, and a cross. Now the cross can be plain or can have an image of a Risen Jesus on it. The purpose of this presentation is to proclaim that Jesus has died and is risen. Children in the atrium never hear of Jesus' death without also hearing of his resurrection. One of my favorite moments in the traditional liturgy of Good Friday is the antiphon chanted during the Veneration of the Cross, "We venerate your cross, O Lord, and praise

and glorify your holy resurrection, for by virtue of the cross, joy has come to the whole.”²²

Let me close with the last verse of my favorite Christmas hymn, *Hark! the herald angels sing*—always our final hymn at Christmas Eve Masses. The words are by Charles Wesley. Again, it’s the end of the Christ Mass. The words take us to Easter:

Mild he lays his glory by,
 Born that man no more may die,
 Born to raise the sons of earth,
 Born to give them second birth.
 Ris’n with healing in his wings,
 Light and life to all he brings,
 Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
 Hail, the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 Glory to the newborn King!²³

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
 and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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²² Ibid., 281. We use the traditional translation.

²³ *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America 1940* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1943), #27.