

Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Advent

December 23, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Malachi 3:1–5; Psalm 25:1–6; Luke 1:57–66*

In the mid-1980s, the late New Testament professor Raymond Brown was asked to write a series of essays on the four passion narratives.¹ He followed this with essays on Matthew and Luke’s birth narratives, which he called, *An Adult Christ for Christmas*.² The next small volume contained essays on Matthew and Luke’s narratives that prepare us to hear of the birth of Jesus, *A Coming Christ in Advent*.³ Today’s gospel lesson is the story of the birth of John the Baptist from Luke.

For reasons not clear to me, the first part of this narrative, John’s annunciation to Zechariah by the angel Gabriel, was the gospel for last Saturday. It was paired with the Book of Judges’ story of the annunciation of the birth of Sampson by an angel to the wife of Manoah—Scripture does not tell us her name. She was barren and had no children.

Today, Luke again reaches back into what we might say is sacred history, this time when Malachi is prophesying. His name actual name is not known but is thought to be “an abbreviation of . . . [the Hebrew for] messenger of Yahweh.”⁴ He writes when the Second Temple has been rebuilt but before the reforms that will come under Ezra and Nehemiah. He condemns “mixed marriages”—David’s descent from the Moabitess Ruth is forgotten. For Malachi, the temple’s priests were, to quote the late Carroll

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *A Crucified Christ in Holy Week: Essays on the Four Gospel Passion Narratives* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986).

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985).

³ Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives for the Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1 and Luke 1)* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988).

⁴ Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 398.

Stuhlmüller, “ignorant, indulgent, and grasping.”⁵ I think we can say from a Christian perspective, John and Jesus were born into a similar world.

Today’s gospel narrative is divided. We hear the beginning of the story of John’s birth; tomorrow, we hear the words that his father can speak because John’s birth’s prophecy has been fulfilled. We call these words the song of John’s father, the Song of Zechariah. It begins, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he has come to his people and set them free.”⁶

I think it’s worth noting that the verbs here indicate what has happened at that moment in history. Mary’s child has not been born, but he’s has been conceived. Zechariah knows what this means. Salvation has come to humankind. In Mark and Matthew, after his baptism by John, Jesus will preach, “The time is fulfilled, and the dominion of God is at hand; turn and believe in the Good News.”⁷ These words are a living truth today for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

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

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Luke 1:67–80.

⁷ Mark 1:15. My translation.