

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C: *Zephaniah 3:14–20; Psalm 85:7–13; Philippians 4:4–9*; Luke 3:7–18*

The first thirty-nine chapters of the Book of Isaiah are regarded as coming from the hand of Isaiah ben Amoz. He wrote before the conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of its population to Babylon. That catastrophe befell Jerusalem in the year 586 before the Christian Era.

Chapter forty marks the beginning of the work of an anonymous prophet who wrote in the period when the Persian King Cyrus defeated the last Babylonian ruler, King Nabonidus, in the year 539.¹ Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem. Second Isaiah begins with these words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’S hand double for all her sins.”²

All four evangelist quote the next two verses as they introduce John the Baptist: “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”³ Only Luke quotes what follows: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”⁴ As Raymond Brown wrote, “Luke had a theological concern for the Gentiles.”⁵

The word we translate as salvation appears once in John, five times in Luke, and to my surprise, not at all in Mark and Matthew. That said, my

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nabonidus>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

² Isaiah 40:1–2.

³ Isaiah 40:3.

⁴ Isaiah 40:4–5.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 235.

online edition of the Revised Standard Version tells me that it also used by Luke five times in the Acts. It is an important word in Paul's letters: First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Corinthians, and Romans—all of which were written and circulated before the writing of any of the gospels. "Salvation" is a word that appears in nine other books of the New Testament.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist tradition that has a lot of what is called "turn or burn" religion: turn to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior or burn in hell. By the time I went to college, I was ready for a fuller understanding of Christianity. My journey began with an introductory New Testament course during my first year. Eventually, friends suggested I join them at Saint Paul's Memorial Church in Charlottesville. I began to find a new church home.

Today's gospel lesson continues Luke's account of John's preaching. It's quite easy for me to remember John's words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"⁶ More important, I now think, is the question the baptized asked, "What then shall we do?"⁷ John answers, "Share your clothing and your food with those who need them." To the tax collectors he says, "Do not steal," to soldiers, "Do not steal, do not lie, and be content with what you are paid."⁸ John the Baptist turns out to be a gentle and caring shepherd.

We should not forget that Mark was written—most scholars think—between the years 68 and 73.⁹ In the year 70, the Romans crushed the Great Jewish Revolt with the conquest and destruction of the Second Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and the slaughter and enslavement of its inhabitants.¹⁰ Matthew, Luke, and John were written with the knowledge

⁶ Luke 3:7.

⁷ Luke 3:10.

⁸ Luke 3:11–14.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 127.

¹⁰ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/timeline-for-the-history-of-jerusalem-4500-bce-present>, (accessed 12 December 2021).

that the Jerusalem Jesus knew was no more. Now in the background of all four gospels is the question of why the sinless one needed to be baptized.

Tomorrow, I will be giving a talk to a group of Manhattan rectors and Episcopal academics. The group has been around for over a century. It is not a secret group. More new rectors turn down membership than accept it. We meet eight or nine months a year for lunch and a talk or paper—the moveable date of Easter affects how many times we meet in any given year. Tomorrow will be my last meeting, and my name was up to speak. I am going to talk briefly about exposure to four different areas of interest that came along for me after seminary.

The first area was Bowen Family Systems Theory. While I was a curate in Baton Rouge. My rector, then Father Charles Jenkins, now the late bishop of Louisiana, attended a conference of the National Association of Episcopal Schools in New Orleans. Rabbi Edwin Friedman was the keynote speaker. His first book, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, had just been published.¹¹

The second was the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a Montessori based program for formation for children ages 3 through 12. I have never been a catechist, but I have attended all three levels of training. My successor in Indiana was not a supporter. But the parish Richard Mohammed and I attend in Naples has all three levels.

The third area was enabled by a Lilly Endowment grant. It supported a three-month sabbatical away from Saint Mary's beginning January 1, 2009. I spent the first two months in Berkeley, California, working with a Greek and Hebrew scholar to begin to renew my working knowledge of New Testament Greek. Then I spent one month traveling—part of the program. I started in England and then went to southern France. One day I decided, I wanted to get to Spain sooner than I planned. I bought a ticket and went.

Finally, the fourth area that has engaged me over the years was a reference in an article by the late Roman Catholic Benedictine abbot and liturgical

¹¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1985).

scholar Patrick Regan. In the January 2007 issue of the journal *Worship*, his article, “The Good Friday Communion Debate,” grabbed my attention. At the end of his article, Regan listed four reasons he strongly supported the ministrations of Communion on Good Friday. I quote the third of three, the “Good Friday communion represents the stubborn [persistence] and official recognition on this one day of a stream of primitive tradition focused more on what Paul Bradshaw calls ‘feeding on the life-giving Jesus’ than on celebrating the holy sacrifice.’ ‘This dominant emphasis,’ he continues, ‘explains why the reception of communion in separation from the eucharistic action proper. . . emerged so soon in the life of the church and became so widely established: they (the faithful) needed, not to celebrate the eucharist often, but to feed on Christ all the time.’ ”¹²

The journal that published, *Studia Liturgica*, is not online. I read it while at Berkeley in a bound volume. At some point, parishioner and librarian Mary Robison was able to get a copy for me.¹³

I want to close by saying a word about the seventh rector of this parish and what an enormous difference his pastoral courage has made for this congregation ever since. When Father Donald Garfield became rector in January 1965, Holy Communion had never been offered at the 11:00 AM Sunday Solemn Mass to the congregation—only the celebrant received. He wrote to the parish community in the-then monthly parish magazine *Ave* for May 1965, “To be a good shepherd, I must feed the sheep.”

So, on the Second Sunday after Easter was known as Good Shepherd Sunday, May 2, 1965, it was Good Shepherd Sunday. The gospel lesson was from the tenth chapter of John. It begins, “Jesus said, ‘I am the Good Shepherd.’ ”¹⁴ Since then, Holy Communion has been offered at every

¹² Patrick Regan, “The Good Friday Communion Debate,” *Worship* 81 (January 2007), 2–23.

¹³ Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus,” *Studia Liturgica* 35 (2005), 1–11.

¹⁴ John 10:11–16.

Mass so all may feed on the life-giving Jesus. We gather at the altar today and every day, to use Bradshaw's words, "to feed on the life-giving Jesus."

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

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