

Matt Jacobson
5 December 2021
St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR C, ADVENT 2
BARUCH 5:1-9
PSALM 126
PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11
LUKE 3:1-6

I have to admit that I smiled a bit when I first saw the clergy calendar for December and noticed I was on the schedule for the second Sunday of Advent. I knew this was a day I had celebrated quite a few times before and, in fact, I've preached on Advent 2 at St. Mary's just about every year since 2016. 2018 is the only exception.¹

So, I thought to myself: what in the world am I going to say about John the Baptist this year that I haven't already said at least a few times here before? Probably not too much.

Though, the Sunday Mass readings do rotate on a three-year cycle, and it just so happens that 2018, the one gap in my Advent 2 run, was three years ago. In other words, this is my first time with Luke's perspective. I've always had either Matthew or Mark.²

While Luke's text is similar to these other accounts, he differs in that he makes a real effort to ground his introduction of John the Baptist in a specific moment in time.

Luke tells us what year we are in the reign of Tiberius Caesar. He lets us know that Pilate was governor and who the different tetrarchs and high priests were. Luke is very concerned about placing John within this historical context. And, he seems particularly focused on the order in which the events unfolded in history.

That is, John the Baptist's ministry is completed first. Jesus then follows. His interest in making this point is especially clear in his account of Jesus' baptism.

In Mark and Matthew, John is baptizing. Jesus then arrives on the scene and is baptized by John.

¹ This includes both Sunday Solemn and Said Masses.

² Matthew 3:1-12 (Year A) and Mark 1:1-8 (Year B).

Luke, who almost certainly had access to Mark's text when writing, instead first states that John is put in prison by Herod. And then, he goes on to note that Jesus is baptized. But, he doesn't specify by whom. He leaves that unsaid.

Part of Luke's agenda, for lack of a better word, may be that he is responding to the fact that some were still following John the Baptist rather than Jesus.

Later in Luke's part two, Acts of the Apostles, he points out how Paul comes upon some of John's followers in Ephesus.³ These folks somehow missed that John was pointing them towards Jesus and not himself.

Here, in Acts, Luke reinforces the point that there is a difference between what was a preparation and what now is a new reality; a difference between John's baptism of repentance and a baptism in Jesus' name. So, he tells us that Paul baptizes these followers of John.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, where the Greek word for repentance carries with it a sense of changing one's mind, of turning away from something and towards something else.⁴

So, we could say that John's baptism was a baptism that turned people towards Jesus. Towards God.

That is an aspect of the Church's baptism, to be sure, but only an aspect. Baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is also much more.

Frank Griswold, the XXV Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, will be the celebrant and preacher this Wednesday at our patronal feast.

He once wrote that "baptism is both a discrete event in a person's life AND a life-long process of 'growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph. 4:15) and acknowledging...'what we will be has not yet been revealed' (1 John 3:2)."⁵

³ Acts 19.3.

⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 640-641. (μετάνοια)

⁵ Frank T. Griswold, "Toward a Baptismal Spirituality," in *Drenched in Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Word and Ministry of Louis Weil*, eds. Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 218.

Bp. Griswold's perspective is, in a sense, similar to what St. Augustine once preached to the newly baptized about the Eucharist: "be what you see; receive what you are."⁶ Augustine is telling them that in their baptism they already are what God intends them to be and yet, at the same time, receiving Christ in the sacrament is part of the process of becoming it.

It may not immediately be clear how that all works. Things haven't been fully revealed. If we think along the lines, similar to Luke's effort to squarely place John the Baptist in a moment in history, where one thing happens after another, then it is hard to see. If it is what we already are, how can we also be in the process of becoming it?

We, like John, do live in a specific moment in time. Things seem to unfold in order. But, we also have a received a baptism that the Prayer Book describes as forming a bond with God that is "indissoluble".⁷ It can't be broken.

And, as we are bonded to God, who exists beyond time, through our baptism, there's a part of us and our story that is no longer bound exclusively to time.

Yet, we still need to return and hear John's call for repentance each year, a repentance that turns us back towards Jesus. So, when I wondered about what might be new to say about John the Baptist this year, maybe it is good to say that there's not much.

We need to check in on how we are preparing for the Lord to come again in glory, because we are still working at becoming what we already are.

Speaking for myself, I can't say that I got it all right in 2021 and there's no need to hear from John the Baptist. As Bishop Griswold put it, it is "a life-long process."⁸

In this lifelong process, we continue to revisit the prophets of old and events that happened within time. It can help to turn us back again to the path, making it as straight as possible, toward that which is beyond time.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Augustine Sermon 272. Bp. Griswold also made this connection in his essay.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 298.

⁸ Griswold, *Drenched in Grace*, 218.