

Second Sunday of Advent 5 December 2021

Malachi 3:1-4 / Luke 1:68-79 / Philippians 1:3-11 / Luke 3:1-6

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

On this second Sunday of Advent – already! – we hear about messengers and forerunners announcing the advent of our God. All baptized people are called to participate in the sharing of this Good News, as we hear in the voices of Malachi, of the priest Zechariah who is John the Baptist’s father, of Saint Paul, and finally Saint Luke. Aside from the promise of these readings, as a musician I love our Advent readings for their beauty in another way. Many of these texts were used by George Frederick Handel in writing the *Messiah* in the late 1700s. So hearing them from the Bible may be doubly meaningful to those who recognize the words from watching or performing that great work that tells the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

As we talked about last Sunday, we are in the season of waiting and preparing for the Lord’s coming. We await both the human child who will be born on Christmas and the coming again of the Lord of heaven and earth at the end of time.

The prophet Malachi, whose name actually means “my messenger,” urges the people to prepare by purifying our lives from sin in our first reading. In response to his words, we joined in reading the Song of Zechariah. This priest, who was surprised to become the father of John

the Baptist, adds to a Jewish psalm the promise of the coming Messiah and his son's future role as a prophet.

This is exciting stuff for many of us to hear, especially those who themselves are anxiously awaiting the Messiah. Advent promises deliverance from oppression, and even as we await Christmastide 2021, many of us struggle during the holiday season. We may be grieving the loss of a loved one, coping with serious illness, separation from family, financial concerns, loneliness. We need to know we aren't alone, so we pray, Come, Lord Jesus!

Our second reading, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, is full of joy because of Paul's faith in God's grace and compassion. We might not've even realized this letter was written from prison if he hadn't said so, it's so filled with thankfulness that we all share in God's grace even as we await Christ's return to earth.

And then we're officially introduced to John the Baptist in our gospel reading. Now, out of the four Evangelists, Saint Luke is the one who writes the most like an historian. He takes the time to place the characters he's telling us about in the historical framework of what was going on in the Roman world, the world inhabited by the Jewish people.

Perhaps Luke does this as a confession of faith; he is telling us about events that would seem rather small in relation to the rest of the world: a priest and his wife who have struggled with

infertility are having a son, and later we'll hear about the fortunes of a young pregnant woman and her fiancé. Yet these stories have global significance.

The prophet John the Baptist who we meet this morning may represent the Old Testament prophets. John comes from a priestly lineage on both sides of his family, he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, and the angel Gabriel has said he has the spirit and power of Elijah. John is calling for repentance – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – and he's announcing the coming of the Messiah, who will be the salvation of Israel.

John is right on the hinge of history; he marks the end of the age of the law and prophets, and he introduces the age of redemption when, as his father says, “by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.”

Did it seem strange the way our gospel reading starts off with Luke listing seven of the movers and shakers of Jesus' time? Not one, or two, but seven, before announcing that “the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.” Compared to the seven power brokers named before him, John the Baptist is a nobody. And he's in the wilderness, which in the Bible is a place of testing and sacrifice where nobody in their right mind wants to be. So John's a nobody who's nowhere, yet this is where the Word of God appears. Not in Jerusalem or Rome, but in the margins. This is where the Word of God often shows up: right where we least expect it.

In this introduction, Saint Luke sets up a tension that will continue through his gospel. First John the Baptist, and then Jesus, will literally turn people away from “the powers that be” toward God. So they pose a threat to the people invested in the structure of their society.

John preaches repentance and forgiveness, and so does Jesus, who even prays for the forgiveness of the people who crucify him. And their deaths, followed by Jesus’ resurrection, will shake the foundations of power of the world of that time and place.

Luke claims Jesus’ salvation for “all flesh,” for the people who put their faith in Jesus Christ. We’re all powerfully included in the story of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation that arises from John the Baptist’s unlikely encounter with the Word of God in the middle of nowhere.

Perhaps if we look around today, we might find similar encounters with God’s Word, hidden right there in plain sight, on the margins, where we wouldn’t expect it, because that’s how it is with God’s Word.

We may recognize God’s presence and promise in all sorts of places – at a concert, or a family gathering, during a tough conversation, or Bible study, or service project... All we know is, God’s Word comes just where it’s needed, and to the most unlikely people.

A theme of Luke’s gospel is how God regularly chooses people the world may see as insignificant, through whom God does wonderful things. People like John the Baptist, Mary

the illiterate unwed teenaged mom, the shepherds at the bottom of the economic ladder who become the audience of the heavenly choir, even the one convicted as a criminal hanging on a cross.

Many of us may feel we don't hold positions that would put us on a "who's who" list, yet God may be eager to use us to participate in God's world-changing, world-saving activity. And the ways God uses our talents and abilities might seem small to us, but they are not small to those who receive our gifts. So let's imagine how God may be at work in us, through our relationships, jobs, and families, making the world a more trustworthy place.

This morning let us think about God's presence and Word working through ordinary people, and use Saint Luke's model: In the twenty-first year of the twenty-first century, when Joseph Biden was President of the United States, and Kathy Hochul was governor of the State of New York, and Edward Wehrheim was Town Supervisor of Smithtown, and Elizabeth Eaton was presiding bishop of the ELCA, the Word of the Lord came to Saint Andrew's in Smithtown.

Amen.