

2 Advent, YR. C,
December 9, 2018
Canticle 16; Luke 3:1-6

This second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist bursts upon the scene. We have two readings this morning about John: the Canticle of Zechariah (John's father), and then the segment from Luke's gospel. A word first about Zechariah. He and his wife were elderly. They had never had a child, which was the sorrow of their lives. Zechariah was a priest and one day was in the temple offering incense, when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that he and Elizabeth would have a child. Not just any child, though. This child, Gabriel says, is to turn the hearts of Israel to the Lord and to make ready a people to receive him. Gabriel also tells him that the child's name will be John.

Zechariah heard the message; however, his response was HOW CAN I BE SURE THIS WILL BE? Gabriel doesn't have any patience with this answer and tells John that because of it, he'll be struck dumb until after all the predicted events occurred. If you'll remember the story of the Annunciation, when Gabriel brought a similar

message to Mary, she too had a question. In her case it was, HOW CAN THIS BE? It's interesting to note that Gabriel doesn't take umbrage at Mary's question. To start with the questions are different. Zechariah's question has to do with doubt and a desire for certainty: HOW CAN I BE SURE? Mary's seems to be more concerned with the mechanics of the whole thing. And perhaps there's also a hint here that God expects more of an elderly priest than of a teen-age girl.

In any event, the Canticle we recited instead of the psalm is the Canticle that Zechariah sang at John's birth. He could sing it because when the child was born and people wanted to name him after his father, Zechariah signaled to Elizabeth that the child was to be named John. And when he did so, he found that he could speak again.

And his song is about the savior who is to come, as promised, who will rid Israel of its enemies and make it holy and righteous. The song also tells of John's mission, this mission of preparation. I want to look more carefully at some of the language in the canticle in a moment, but first, if we bounce ahead to

Luke's gospel, it's interesting to note who has been chosen to bring the message. It's not the powers that be. Not the imperial Romans, not the Herodian kings, not the religious establishment. Instead, Luke says, **THE VOICE OF GOD CAME TO JOHN IN THE WILDERNESS**. And his message was compelling. Why, do you think? He certainly wasn't anyone's idea of successful or prosperous or even well-dressed. Maybe the message was compelling because those who heard him knew that he was telling the truth. The wilderness, the desert, would have resonated with the Israelites and brought back memories of their own time in the desert. And perhaps there's something about the desert, where there are no distractions, where everything is stripped to the essentials, that makes it easier to see the truth. So, John's message: no spin, no obfuscation, no telling people what they wanted to hear, no lying – just the flat out truth. You're going in the wrong direction, so you need to **STOP and TURN AROUND and REDIRECT YOURSELVES TO GOD**. I once heard someone say that if you're standing at the edge of an abyss, one step forward

is NOT progress. That could have been John's message.

I'd like us to also look more closely at some of the key theological concepts as set out in the Canticle.

Those are the ideas of preparation, salvation, sin and forgiveness, enemies and peace.

First preparation. One writer I read talked about Christmas preparations when she was growing up. Her mother, she said, would spend a great deal of time combing out the fringes on the oriental rugs in the living and dining rooms. I remember my mother who would wash and wax all the hardwood floors in the house. And it's true, I think, that when we're preparing for guests we sort of look around the house with new eyes and make some necessary change: we finally fix that broken door knob and change the light bulb that's been burnt out for a while and clean off the messy countertops. John's preparation goes much deeper than that. He challenges us to an examination of our lives, our values, our priorities and of the health of our societies. As someone put it, as we're getting ready for the joy of Christmas, John is a speed bump on

the way to Bethlehem. Celebration of the birth of the Christ, yes, but the kind of preparation that recognizes the significance of this birth.

The second thing I'd like us to look at is the idea of salvation, tied to the idea of a savior. I think we should note that while the people hearing Luke would have believed in an afterlife, the idea of salvation was not centered on the next world, but rather on the quality of life and community in THIS world. The word "salvation" connotes healing and thriving. It also means spacious, a broadening out, abundance. As such, it includes a kind of freedom from everything that oppresses us: slavery, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual; things like addictions and anxiety, and maybe most important, fear. It has to do with the kind of life we can live here and now if we make the turn and live in the Kingdom right here and right now.

And then there's sin and forgiveness. If we were to ask people what sin is, some may respond that it's breaking the rules or the commandments, but on a deeper level, it can mean an attitude toward God and toward life that predisposes us toward specific

acts that are wrong. Some theologians talk about pride, or about anxiety, or mistrust as those basic problem-creating attitudes . It's been suggested that the language of sin and forgiveness, while it was the way Israel and its prophets understood the human condition, maybe doesn't speak as much to us today as images of exile or blindness or of being lost. Whichever image works for you, the truth that's being conveyed is that things aren't right with us or with our world. We're like Miss Clavell in the Madeline stories who wakes in the middle of the night and says "something is not right!" Perhaps the root of it all is that we are finite creatures and we resent that. We are tempted to want it to be "all about ME," we want to be self-sufficient and in control. As one Jewish author said, we live lives of hard, defiant self-absorption, straining for power and prestige, competing with one another in every more feverish conspicuous displays, hankering restlessly after novelty and distraction and accepting the callousness, brutality, aggression and injustice of our world. All that is what John is trying to get us to see. Because until we see it and realize it's not right, we won't stop and turn around. We won't repent. And

finally, there's that line about being saved from our enemies. No doubt, Israel would have thought primarily about Rome and its occupation. But the final enemy for all humans is death and that would be defeated, once and for all, by Christ in the Resurrection.

When I was in seminary and studying preaching, the standing challenge was to always preach the good news. Is there good news in these scriptures? I would say yes.

It's good news because, first of all, if you can look around with Miss Clavell and say this isn't right, that means that you have a vision and understanding of how things SHOULD be. You know what Isaiah means when he says the mountains will be made low and the rough places plain, that swords will be beaten into plowshares, that lions and lambs will lie down together. And because we know that, we already know God's plan for the world.

Second it's good news because if we agree with John's message, we know that our lives are not futile – there's something we can do. It's possible to turn around and put our feet in the ways of peace.

It's possible to align our wills with God's will for the world. We can be healers of our fractured world.

Lastly, it's good news, because we can trust in the eventual triumph of God's plan – that plan for peace – that plan that means that **ALL FLESH SHALL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD**. How glorious to be chosen to participate in that plan. Amen.