

The Second Sunday of Advent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Baruch 5:1-9
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths; all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 3:1-6

Every year, the First Sunday of Advent is always focused on the second coming of Christ, and every year the Second Sunday of Advent is always focused on the proclamation of John the Baptist. The same thing is true for this year, Year C. We're going to be looking at John the Baptist's proclamation as it's given to us in the Gospel of Luke. So if you'll turn with me to Luke 3:1-6, the Gospel reading for today is as follows:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiber'i-us Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturae'a and Trachoni'tis, and Lysa'ni-as tetrarch of Abile'ne, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Ca'iaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechari'ah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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.”¹

Alright, let's pause there. So that's the gospel for today. And each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke - and in fact the Gospel of John as well - they all have an account somewhere at the beginning of the book of the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. In this case we're looking at Luke's account and you can see some distinctive elements. One of the first things that strikes you — if you read Luke's gospel in comparison with the other accounts of John the Baptist — is this litany of historical figures that he introduces John with, right. So it's very interesting here. The Gospel of Luke is written very much as a work of ancient history, as a work of Greco-Roman historiography. Luke is consciously writing as an historian, and one of the things historians love to do is give us dates and names and places in order to anchor their story in real events, in real space, and in real time. We see that Luke begins his account of John the Baptist by doing just that. Now if you're like me, you hear all these names, they might just wash over you. Like, who's Tiberius Caesar? Well I guess he's the Emperor. Who's Pontius Pilate? Oh he's the one that put Jesus to death. Who's Herod the tetrarch and his brother Philip? Oh, well I don't know, I guess he's related to Herod. So is this the same Herod who attempted to kill Jesus when he was a baby? Is it his son? Who are all these different people?

So before we get into the content of John the Baptist, just a kind of quick note here. First, notice the fact that Luke is clearly not writing mythology. He's also clearly not writing a fairytale, right. No fairytale begins in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, you know, during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. That's not how fairytales begin. Fairytales begin with once upon a time, right. So Luke is clearly talking about history. So what we're preparing for during Advent and what we're going to celebrate during Christmas is not some myth. It's an actual historical event that took place in real space and real time, and the gospels describe it as such.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

The second element of this that is important is just to note that all of these leaders that Luke just mentioned are pretty bad people, right. So for example, Tiberius Caesar. Luke says that John the Baptist arises in the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign. So who was Tiberius Caesar? Well he began to reign as Emperor of Rome in the year 14 A.D. and then he reigned all the way up to around 37 A.D. So Tiberius was the Emperor during the adult life of Jesus Christ, during the time of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection, even for a little while after the resurrection. So whenever you hear Jesus in the gospel talk about Caesar, like when he says render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, he's talking about Tiberius, right. Now Tiberius, I don't have time to get into it but let's just say this, if you study the life of Tiberius as written about in say Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, he was a Roman historian, of all the emperors of Rome, Tiberius was one of the most debauched. And that's saying a lot if you compare the debauchery and the depravity of figures like Nero and Caligula, okay. So there's a kind of irony here. During Tiberius' reign it was a peaceful time in the Roman Empire. One of the Roman historians said all was quiet under the reign of Tiberius, and that's true. On the other hand, Tiberius' own personal life was extremely depraved. He engaged in public displays of sexual immorality, which are too graphic for me to describe for you here. He also murdered those who would not commiserate with him in these things. So he was a murderous and depraved individual. He's not a good person, let's put it that way. In fact, he died by being smothered to death in his bed, okay. So by the end of his life he was not well-liked either and he was murdered, okay. You can read about that in the books of Tacitus and Suetonius.

Well what about Pontius Pilate, okay? Was he a good guy? Well no, you know that from the gospels from the passion narratives, but it's important to recognize that not only Christians but other people recognize Pontius Pilate as a corrupt and morally despicable person. So for example, Philo of Alexandria, who was a contemporary of Jesus, he was a Jewish writer living in Egypt in the early First Century A.D., this is how he described Pontius Pilate's character, and I'm going to quote here. So according to Philo, Pilate was known for the following:

[Pilate's] corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people

untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity.²

That's Philo's *Embassy to Gaius*, paragraph 302. So that's a pretty bad description of who we're talking about here. So Tiberius was a completely debauched Emperor, Pilate was a corrupt and evil governor, what about the other figures mentioned here? What about Annas and Caiaphas, right, the two high priests that are mentioned? Well Josephus tells us that both of them were deposed actually from their high priesthood for various wicked acts that they were engaged in.

So what is Luke doing here in these initial verses? He's just giving you a kind of snapshot of the political leadership of the time in which John the Baptist arose, and anyone on the First Century scene would recognize that this was a time of evil leaders, of corrupt governors, of corrupt and even evil priests working in the Temple, you know, leading the Jewish people as well. And into that corruption and into that scene comes John the Baptist, the son of the righteous priest Zechariah, with a message of good news that the Messiah is coming and that salvation is at hand, right. So it's just a powerful, powerful portrait of the time when John the Baptist arose on the scene. Sometime around 29 or 30 A.D. John comes onto the scene and this is what happens. He goes out into the desert, he goes out into the wilderness, and he begins preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now there are lots of things we could say about John, whole books have been written about him. For our purposes here I just want to highlight one element: the geography of John's ministry. Why does John go out into the wilderness? Why does he go into the River Jordan to preach this baptism of repentance? Why not go to Jerusalem? I mean if you want to get crowds of people, if you want to get attention, if you want to call more people to repentance, don't you go to the city? Why do you go to the wilderness or the desert? The answer to that question is found in the quotation from the Book of Isaiah that Luke gives you here. This is a quotation of a prophecy of the new exodus, when God is going to save his people in the future like he saved them in the past. He's going to make a way through the

² Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 302

desert and lead them home to the promised land in ways similar to the path through the desert that he made at the time of Moses and the Exodus, where he led the people out of Egypt through the desert and then to the river Jordan. And if you're familiar with the Book of Joshua, you'll recall that in Joshua 4 & 5 it says that the first exodus from Egypt came to an end when Joshua and the 12 tribes passed through the waters of the river Jordan and entered into the earthly promised land of Canaan. So what Isaiah says in this oracle is that in the future there's going to be a new exodus. That's one of the categories that they describe the future age of salvation with as a new exodus. So John the Baptist as the prophet of the age of salvation is also a prophet of the new exodus, a prophet of the new way of salvation that God is going to make with the coming of the Messiah, right, that Isaiah had spoken about in his oracles.

Now every time I talk about this topic it's so tempting to just open up this giant can of worms because this is what I wrote my dissertation about, it's a topic that's very near and dear to my heart, and I think it's one that really helps us get into Advent in particular. But for reasons of space and time let me just make one quick point here about the new exodus, you know, what is this new exodus? Well there are two images that get used for it in the Old Testament. One is making the way through the desert like we see here in the book of the prophet Isaiah. You know, God carving a path to the promised land just like he had done at the time of Moses. But there's another image that gets used for the new exodus in the Old Testament and it's the image of the ingathering of the exiles, right. So in the First Century A.D., although people don't often think about this, the Jewish people had a problem. The problem was that over the centuries, the majority of the 12 tribes of Israel had been scattered to the four winds.

So for example, in the Eighth Century B.C. the Assyrian Empire came in and exiled 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel in what was called the Assyrian exile; it happened in 722 B.C. And then a couple centuries later the Babylonians came in and they exiled the remaining two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. They brought them to Babylon in 587 B.C. in what was known as the Babylonian exile. Every First Century Jew would've known that the Babylonian exile, the second exile, came to an end in the Fifth Century B.C. whenever the Persians allowed the Jews, the Judahites and the Benjaminites, to come back and rebuild the Temple and

rebuild the city of Jerusalem. That was the end of the Babylonian exile, but every First Century Jew would've also known that the Assyrian exile, the 10 northern tribes who'd been scattered amongst the Gentiles, had never come home. This was the origin of the legend of the lost 10 tribes of Israel. The idea that these 10 tribes remain scattered and mixed amongst the Gentiles, but that one day when the Messiah came those lost tribes of Israel would actually return to the promised land in the ingathering of the exiles, which is described by some of the prophets as the new exodus. So the new exodus is really the gathering in of those lost tribes of Israel.

All of that background is really essential for understanding the first reading today. So just like the reading from the gospel was about the new exodus, the reading from the Old Testament today is about the ingathering of the exiles. So if you turn with me, the Old Testament reading for the Second Sunday of Advent is from a book that's only in the Catholic Old Testament, it's the little-known Book of Baruch. So if you look at the Old Testament, Baruch was the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah. He would've lived in the Sixth Century before Christ, and there's a little book that is often circulated as an appendix to the Book of Jeremiah called the Book of Baruch. In chapter 5, verses 1-9, Baruch gives a prophecy of the new exodus, it's a prophecy of the ingathering of all the scattered children of Israel. In this prophecy he depicts the ingathering as children coming home to their mother with Jerusalem being depicted as a mother waiting for her children to come home. So this is, it's a beautiful prophecy, this is what it says:

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting. For God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. For your name will for ever be called by God, "Peace of righteousness and glory of godliness." Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east, at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went forth from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may

walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Alright, so notice something about that prophecy. Baruch says to Jerusalem look up, lift up your eyes, arise and see your children coming home not just from the east but from the west. Now that doesn't just mean every direction, it also means the ingathering of the Assyrian exiles, the ingathering of all the tribes of Israel, because the Babylonian exile only went east, it didn't go west, it went to the east. But the Assyrians actually scattered the children of Israel all over the place: north, south, east, and west. So what Baruch is describing there is the time of the Messiah, when there was this belief that all 12 tribes, not just two, all 12 tribes would be gathered together again and brought to a new Jerusalem, a more glorious Jerusalem, and a new temple that would be greater even than the Temple of Solomon; a Jerusalem that would be greater than the Jerusalem of Solomon, right, that would put on the robe of righteousness and wear this diadem of God's glory.

That's what John the Baptist is announcing in the wilderness. That's what John the Baptist goes out to the river Jordan to proclaim, and that's why John the Baptist was so popular amongst the Jews of his day, because he was saying to them the time of the ingathering of the exiles is at hand, and in order to get ready for the coming of the Messiah you need to put away your sins; you need to turn away from a life of sin and turn to a life of grace, repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's the condition that makes Israel ready to meet her Messiah, because at the end of the day remember, what was it that led Israel into exile, what scattered them amongst the nations? It was sin. It's sin that exiles us from God. It's sin that separates us from God. It's sin that, in a sense, drives us away from the promised land that God made to be our home, and so what John's doing is saying to the people if you repent, the age of salvation will come and people will be able to come home and the new Exodus will take place, the ingathering of the exiles, and God's going to make a new way in the desert and bring his children home.

Alright, and if you have any doubt that that's the case, think about what happens after John's ministry. Jesus comes on to the scene, what's the first thing he does? How many apostles does he gather around him? Not one, not two, not three, not

10, but 12, showing that he is going to bring about the ingathering of the 12 tribes. Not by an earthly return to the earthly promised land, Jesus doesn't send his men out and say bring every Israelite you find amongst the Gentiles back to the earthly Jerusalem and the earthly temple, no, no, no, this is going to be a new Jerusalem, it's going to be a new temple. It's going to be a new ingathering of the exiles to a new Jerusalem. That explains the Responsorial Psalm for today which is Psalm 126. It's a beautiful Psalm about the end of the exile. Now in this case it is about the end of the Babylonian exile. This Psalm describes what the Israelites felt like, or should I say this Psalm describes what the Jews, the Judahites and Benjaminites, the Southern tribes, what they felt like when they came back to Jerusalem to Zion after the Babylonian exile. So listen to this, it's beautiful:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb!
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy!
He that goes forth weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

So the imagery there is saying that when we came back to Jerusalem, to Zion from exile, we were like men dreaming. It was a dream. The joy was so great that it just didn't seem real. That's what we do in the church now. We're taking that joy and making it our own in this Responsorial Psalm as we celebrate the salvation that's going to be coming to us through the birth of the Messiah and the Feast of Christmas.

Okay, so why does the church give us this text for the Second Sunday of Advent? Well remember, Advent is a preparatory season. So what she's trying to do is get us to go back in time, put ourselves in the shoes of the Jews who were waiting for the coming of the Messiah and the ingathering of the exiles and the forgiveness of sins, in order to prepare us to celebrate the coming of the Messiah in the Feast of Christmas. So I'd like to bring this to an end just by looking at two quotations from the living tradition on the readings for today. The first one is from Pope Gregory the Great, and this is what he had to say in one of his homilies on the Gospel of Luke about the coming of Christ into a world of corrupt leadership. So this is what Gregory says:

“It is apparent, then, that Judea, which lay divided among so many kings, had reached the end of its sovereignty. It was also appropriate to indicate not only under which kings but also under which high priests this occurred.”

So he's talking about how Luke mentions there, you know, Tiberius and Pontius Pilate and Herod, as well as Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests.

“Since John the Baptist preached one who was at once both king and priest, the evangelist Luke indicated the time of his preaching by referring to both the kingship and the high priesthood.”³

In other words, Luke isn't just anchoring the incarnation in time and space, he's also naming the earthly kings and the earthly priests because Jesus is going to come and usurp them. He's going to come into the world as the true king and the true high priest who will inaugurate the true kingdom of righteousness as well as the everlasting priesthood of the new covenant. So it's a beautiful reflection on Jesus as king and priest.

The second quote from the living tradition is from Origen of Alexandria who was writing in the Third Century, early Third Century A.D. This is what Origen has to say about preparing the way of the Lord, preparing the new exodus, right, because

³ Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 6; trans. in Arthur Just, p. 58

at the end of the day the new exodus isn't about us traveling to the earthly holy land. So what is it about? Origen says this:

“Prepare a way for the Lord.” What way are we to prepare for the Lord? Surely not a material way. Can the Word of God go on such a journey? Should not the way be prepared for the Lord within? Should not straight and level paths be built in our hearts? This is the way by which the Word of God has entered. That Word dwells in the spaces of the human heart.⁴

So that's Origen's *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*. So what's Origen saying there? At the end of day what he's saying is that in Advent, in the season of Advent, what we have to do is put ourself back in the place of the Jews who are preparing themselves for the coming of the Messiah by making a way for the word of the Lord in our heart. At the end of the day the new exodus is not an earthly journey to the earthly promised land, it's a supernatural journey to the heavenly promised land, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the new Jerusalem, where Christ right now sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father, and where the Saints right now have been gathered in from the four corners of the earth to go into the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem, of the new Jerusalem, of the Jerusalem of righteousness and peace and everlasting joy, that we too hope to be members of at the end of our earthly journey. So Origen helps us to realize that this new exodus is an exodus to a heavenly and not an earthly promised land, and that's what we're getting ready for during Advent. That's why Advent is a season of penance and preparation. It's a great time to go to the sacrament of confession and make a path for the Lord, not on the earthly paths of the desert or in the land of Israel, but in the pathways of our own hearts.

⁴ Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 21.5; trans. in Arthur Just, p. 60