

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2C
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
FATHER JORDAN GREATBATCH

Baruch 5:1-9
Psalm 85
Philippians 1: 3–11
Luke 3: 1–6

Today's Gospel reading could be straight out of recent News headlines. We have seen a lot of doom and gloom in our world these past few years. From the pandemic to its economic and social fallout, wars raging away, warnings of climate change. Due to the nature of the 24-hour news service we are constantly bombarded with these prophecies of doom on our screens. However, as unsettling as this all is it is surprisingly nothing new. There have always been prophets of doom, some more successful than others in instilling the fear of God or any other agenda into the masses. John doesn't necessarily fit this rather narrow description of a prophet, yet we cannot ignore his strong language in connect with Jesus and his second coming in our Gospel today.

While Christians today have differing viewpoints on when, how, or whether the second Advent will occur, virtually all Christians believe that God is dissatisfied with the world in its present state and seeks to increase love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance.

In Advent, the church thinks afresh about how to join God in the movement towards a world that is more like the realm of heaven. I can think of no better Advent guide than John the Baptist, whose instructions for preparation are condensed into one word: "Repent!"

John is often portrayed in the Gospels as an end-time prophet whose message is that the time has come to repent because the agent through whom God will affect the transformation from this age to the next is now revealed: Jesus of Nazareth. A principal difference between John and Jesus concerns the timing of the movement towards this kingdom. John sees the realm as future. Luke portrays the realm as already partially manifest through Jesus, though becoming finally and fully manifest in the future (after the second coming). Repentance is the first

step towards joining Jesus in the community moving towards the new kingdom. (Matthew 3:1, 8, 11; 4:17).

The root meaning of “to repent” is “to turn” or to have a dramatic change of mind and direction. To repent is to turn away from the values and practices of the old age (e.g., idolatry, violence, injustice, exploitation, slavery, and scarcity) and to turn towards the values and practices of the kingdom of God.

In this context, repentance includes feeling sorry for one’s personal sins, but it is so much more. To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one’s life colludes with the assumptions and behaviours of the old age, to turn away from such complicity, and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the Kingdom of heaven.

Today’s text helps us reflect on what values and practices of the old age come to expression in ourselves the local community or the larger world, and also where we see qualities and values of the new world.

So what does it mean to disconnect from the old age values and align with the new? For John the Baptist it was reforming the old religion that bogged down believers and offering a new way, a way based on forgiveness, love and hope. This is even true of our own lives and attitudes. Change, which is what repentance is about, is often a scary prospect, but we know that it is God that brings about change.

This is what we experience in the sacrament of Baptism. Yes, the outward sign is important, the water, the words, the oil, but what is more important is what God is doing in the heart, in the invisible parts.

For John today invites listeners to be immersed (baptized). Immersion is an occasion for confession of sin, that is, naming and renouncing collaboration with the old age. Furthermore, God uses water to initiate those who repent into a community awaiting the coming of the new age.

Where John immerses with water, Jesus will do so “with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. The reference to the Holy Spirit assures the community that the

Spirit that fills Jesus at immersion will also fill the disciples. The reference to “fire” is a vivid image for the apocalypse and especially for the last judgment.

From this point of view, the Second Sunday of Advent could be an excellent day for baptism. Baptism does not so much welcome the baptised into an institution (as we might think of the church) but into an alternative (or countercultural) community empowered by the Spirit for life and witness.

John therefore offers his listeners a choice. They can repent, and join the movement toward the new age, or they can continue to collude with the old age and face its consequences. Which underscores a deep point: When we do not cooperate with God’s purposes, we invite the consequences upon ourselves.

As Luke’s gospel unfolds, Jesus reinforces the importance of making this choice, then goes a step farther. As rabbi as well as final prophet, Jesus instructs the community how to embody the qualities of the new world while still living in the

period of transition between old and new. Repentance is just the first step.

For in this Advent season, we, like John, are to ‘prepare the way of the Lord,’ so ‘that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

And what may this look like? Well in this Advent God may be calling us to leave behind the old world and embrace the new: whatever that may look like. That doesn’t mean throwing out that which is good and worthy just for the sake of it, for God maybe calling us to embrace ever more fully the traditions we hold dear, but rather the old world, just like the old self holds us back from being fully alive, not conforming to this world but being transformed by the renewing of our minds. May we like John the Baptist herald the coming of Christ this advent, and leave the old and embrace the new, as scary as that may be. For God is with us.