

## Sermon Outline

The Word of God this morning is like a play in 4 acts

Be careful what you pray for.

The past is prologue.

The coordinates for a wise journey are constantly recalculating.

You can't get to the baby without going through the Baptist.

Our Advent lessons come together to give us a picture of the breadth and depth of the faith journey and the path to our salvation, making clear that it is not easy, not strictly prescribed, and open to everyone. Salvation is not just a religious concept or an idea in our heads but is something that is lived and experienced through our senses, we see salvation, taste it, smell it, feel and hear it. Our Advent and our life journey is not just toward the end of salvation after our death but a journey in an everyday, sensory consciousness of salvation as an ongoing reality.

### *Be careful what you pray for*

Malachi (means messenger) tells us that Israel has been allowed to return home by the King of Persia and the Temple has been restored. The Israelites had started off being faithful, the priests had performed their duties and yet...prosperity had not come. The people are grumbling and whiny because they expected that Israel would be made great again and it hadn't. Not in the way they wanted it to. Israel did not regain the power and esteem it once had. The unjust were well off and thriving, and, the Israelites were jealous and disgruntled. They became lax in their faithfulness and the priests negligent of their duties. They intermarried with pagans, ignored religious obligations and were indulgent and decadent. Finally, after decades of praying/whining to the God of Justice to return and smite their enemies and straighten things out God responded directly to them through Malachi. And they got a much more direct response than they expected. The Lord is going to focus his attention on you not your enemies. You are the people of the Lord who have turned away from what you knew, and what you professed. You have become broken and unkempt and are no suitable offering to God. The time is coming for you to clean up your act. You will be washed with the Fuller's soap and purified in the refiners fire, and then just perhaps you will be prepared for the way of God. You must be freed from the obstacle within you.

### *The past is prologue*

Do you remember what happened to Zechariah? He scoffed when the messenger from God came to announce that he in his 90's and Elizabeth in her 80's were to conceive and bear a child. When the baby is born, Elizabeth tells the elders that the baby is to be named Yahya, or John. Concerned that she was naming the child with a name that was not part of their family or tradition they turned to Zechariah. He writes the name John on a tablet and his lips are unsealed. And he sings this song to his newborn son. His song is one of hope, of deliverance and redemption. His words are not about promised lands or future generations, but about the simple reality of being free to serve God. He celebrates the gifts of God in the past and he sees in the babe before him one who will be instrumental

in preparing the people for the redeemer. He "sees" salvation as a present possibility. We sing this Canticle to remind us of that promise and what is possible with God.

*The coordinates for a wise journey are constantly recalculating.*

This sounds a little like a TV ad or a meme on Face book. But it speaks to the heart of what Paul is trying to say.

The Philippians are a community much beloved by Paul, who in turn love and support him. Writing to them from prison, Paul engages them in a dialogue between the present and the future, drawing their and our attention to the promise of the new day of Christ's second coming and the continuing journey to live in the kingdom now and be prepared to welcome the Lord when we get there. Paul's emphasis is relational and is focused on the purpose of our faithfulness in this life. Paul is sharing guidance for going forward and is emphasizing the importance of moral love and wisdom, life choices made not for our own self interest, but in the interest of salvation for all. It is important to understand that the word Paul is using in urging them to knowledge and full insight which we translate as 'decide' means very much more than choosing a single rigid path. It is a word that encompasses the process of decision, not the simple fact of it. It is not deciding which subway line we are going to take to the end, and just looking out the window at stops along the way. It is being open to what God and creation put in front of us each step of the way. We recalculate because life is full of the unexpected, both positive, and challenging, circumstances and the people we interact with change, and we must stop, ask, evaluate and adjust our journey living fully in the moment and not just rushing blindly to the end. Following the word of God is an everyday proposition. It is a journey which begins knowing that we are both living in and seeking salvation and the kingdom while we move through life to our end in the Lord.

*You can't get to the baby without going through the Baptist.*

The nativity story appears in two of the gospels, the story of John the Baptist appears in all four. That might give you a hint to his significance. And as Luke, believer and historian, begins his story he makes sure that it is firmly anchored in time and place by citing all the leaders that had been around then, and the places that they governed. It would be as though I stood here and said; in the year 1989, the first year of the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush, when John Sununu was governor of the state of New Hampshire and Bill Gardner was in whatever year of his tenure as Secretary of State, when Doug Theuner of blessed memory was the Bishop of our Diocese and Maeve Blackman was in her second year as a parishioner here at St. Paul's ...this important thing happened. People hearing would know certainly that what they were about to be told was connected firmly to them and their reality.

And now what about John? A nowhere man from nowhere land? A nobody from the desert who was rumored to live on locusts and honey and wear animal skin. How did he get there? What was he doing. Well, you remember when the edict went out to slay all the babies under the age of 2? Elizabeth took the baby John and fled to the desert. Zechariah at home was confronted by the authorities about the whereabouts of his son, and when he refused was killed. Not many years later we are told that Elizabeth also died. And so, there was John, in the desert, growing up as a part of the land, becoming a man of the desert, and a man who listened and learned. In the desert wilderness there were none of the distractions one found in the city, none of the push and shove of other people making demands, none of the judgments to obstruct his way. It was a place to listen and hear.

Luke in setting the leaders and John in contrast to one another is drawing our attention to the important reality of just WHO was entrusted with God's word. Not the civic and religious greats of the time, but the outsider. Not one who was embedded in the culture and systems of the time, but the one who was free of them to hear and speak only God's unfiltered word. And John spoke passionately, and preached repentance fiercely and called on the people who came out to hear him to be cleansed in baptism and begin anew to prepare a way for THE redeemer who would come and be their salvation.

To fully understand the lesson for us here we need also to pay attention to the passage from Isaiah that places John firmly in the salvation story as the one who will proclaim and be the messenger. Isaiah tells us that what will happen is that the mountains will be made low and the valleys made high and the paths straightened. Isaiah is not talking here about the physical landscape, he is not calling for the redesign of an exchange on 193. Isaiah is talking about our personal and our communal landscape. We are being called to take a bulldozer to those structures in society that get in the way of hearing and following the word of God in our lives. Those structures that maintain inequality, poverty, and injustice. Those of us who may live on the mountain tops need to be willing to let go of our privilege and reach out to those in the depths of the valley's. We all must find a place of desert silence in our lives where we may listen for the whisper of God and not be too distracted to hear it. So,

*Be careful what you pray for...search inside you for the sin or hurt in your life that is keeping a barrier between you and God and getting in the way of your preparation. Repent not because it is a sin that angers God but because it is a thing that is harmful to you.*

*The past is prologue...reflect on your own spiritual life and experiences with God. Maybe you have already been prepared for some service or ministry preparing the way of the Lord in ways you might never have realized until a new opportunity or challenge is before you.*

*The coordinates for a wise journey are constantly recalculating...ask yourself if how you are living and what you are doing are the most life giving things for you and your community and all the people of God. Keep asking yourself when you receive new opportunities or face unwelcome challenges so that you walk more wisely and confidently preparing the way.*

*You can't get to the baby without going through the Baptist...*

This is a tricky one because the reality is - it's not the baby we are trying to get to, though celebrating the inbreaking of God into our world is a good and joyful thing to do.

What John is calling each of US to do in our personal Advent preparations is preparing for the Day of the Lord, the second coming, the moment of our meeting with Christ, whether at our own death or when Christ comes once again to redeem the whole world and all who are in it.

In doing these things we will get closer to our true selves as people of God preparing both individually in our lives and hearts, and communally in our communities and world for the way of the Lord that will bring salvation to all humankind.

Amen.