

Lay Preachers' Bulletin – December 2020

December's lectionary notes have been provided by Archbishop Greg Kerr-Wilson, Bishop of the Diocese of Calgary, and the Metropolitan of the Ecclesiastical Province of the Northwest Territories and Yukon.

December 6, 2020 - Advent 2

Mark 1:1-8

The season of Advent is often understood as a time of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. While this is partly true – it is more accurate to say it is preparation for the coming of Christ. As the reading from both Advent 1 and Advent 2 make clear, the preparation is not simply about celebrating the birth, but also about what it means to be ready to receive Christ who comes to us as the Messiah, teaching, healing and challenging us; and also to look forward to the final fulfillment of that coming which we refer to as the “Second Coming” in which the promise of God’s full reign in human life become fully realized. Advent begins with this latter sense, so that as we move into the celebration of Christ’s birth, we keep in mind the greater purpose and goal toward which that birth is directed; and seek to prepare ourselves not only for celebration, but for our own transformation as part and parcel with the salvation of God that comes to us in Jesus.

Today’s gospel reading says it clearly as John the Baptist comes onto the scene saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” John proclaims a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

- John’s words are a quotation from the prophet Isaiah which were calling the people of Israel for a return from exile. The desert is the land between that place of exile and the “promised land” to which God’s people are returning. The people must cross the desert, and then the Jordan river to re-enter the land. Symbolically John the Baptist goes to the Jordan, so that the people may “cross” the Jordan anew through repentance and

washing. It is a call to return from the exile of sin to a life of salvation in God.

- What are the areas of our lives that we have made the paths crooked? How have we directed our path by our own self-will? What things have we cluttered up our lives with that block us from responding to God's love.
- Repentance in the original Greek is "metanoia" – which means "to change our minds", to change our way of thinking. It is not simply about intellectual propositions, but about the way our thinking shapes our doing. What habits of thought might we have that stand in the way of God having God's way with us?

December 13, 2020 - Advent 3

John 1:6-8, 19-28

All of the Gospel accounts preface the story of Jesus' ministry with an account of the preaching of John the Baptist as a herald of and preparation for Jesus. The Gospel of John begins with a prologue, with a beautiful theological reflection on Jesus as the "word made flesh", but v. 6-8 of today's reading pause that reflection to tell us of John who is sent by God to bear witness to Jesus. The story of John's witness is picked up immediately after the prologue, again leading us into the rest of the Gospel account.

- The gospel reading as we have been given it is all about who John the Baptist is, particularly in relation to Jesus - who/what he is, and what he is not.
- "I am not the Messiah" says John when asked by the religious leaders of his day. The Jewish people had been waiting for the Messiah for a long time. Waiting for the one who would set the world right, who would drive out the oppressive Roman rulers and give them their freedom to live their life as the holy people of God.

- “he was not the light, but he came to bear witness to the light”. The prologue begins the description of what John is about. John is a human *agent* – not the *source* of life and truth. – he is bearing witness or testifying to the one who can truly save.
- The narrative, while about John the Baptist, speaks to the broader picture. The Gospel is itself testifying to Jesus; the New Testament testifies; bears witness to Jesus. There is an invitation here – first to believe, but then to testify to what we have come to believe – by word and example. In what ways might we bear witness to Jesus in our own lives?

December 20, 2020 - Advent 4

Luke 1:26-38

Today’s Gospel reading is the story of the Annunciation – so called because the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive Jesus. The “Feast of the Annunciation” is observed on March 25th, and historical evidence suggests that day was observed as a celebration some decades before Christmas began to be observed on December 25th – it is likely that our Christmas celebration date was set because it is nine months after the day that was determined by ancient authorities to be the day Christ was conceived. The narrative was then also included in Advent as part of preparing for the Nativity celebration.

- “of the house of David” – location and genealogy can seem like story-telling niceties, however this reference along with the later mention of Elizabeth as a cousin, tell us that Mary’s child will be both of the kingly line of David, and of the priestly line (Zechariah and Elizabeth give us this connection). So this story of the conception of Jesus is setting us firmly in the long story of biblical narrative of Abraham, Moses and Aaron, and David as it unfolds the history of God’s work of salvation.

- “Do not be afraid” – the angel Gabriel says this to Mary because her response to “Greetings, favoured one, the Lord is with you” is to be perplexed, or, as the Greek word implies “greatly perplexed”, or even disturbed or perturbed. Perhaps in modern terms – “Oh dear, where is this going”. Mary seems to know that true messages from God, even or especially if one is being “favoured” bring with them potential disruption and challenge. In what ways do we allow ourselves to think of God as simply comforter, rather than disruptor or challenger”
- Gabriel’s message is glorious – the birth of “the Son of the Most High”, “his kingdom will last forever;” the name “Jesus” means, “the Lord saves” – and Mary will have the honour of bearing this one. On the other hand, being unmarried and pregnant in Mary’s day was no easy thing. It would have brought disapproval at best, and possibly social ostracization or worse.
- “Here am I ... let it be with me according to your word” – Mary’s response to the angel’s message has stood throughout Christian history as an example of faithful Christian response to God’s call upon us. Her obedience and willingness to be an instrument of God’s saving activity has been interpreted as a reversal of Eve’s disobedience in Eden that brought sin; this obedience opens the path by which salvation comes to the world. It also challenges us to consider the ways that we are being called to obedience – to be, like Mary, bearers of Christ in our own time, place and context.

December 27, 2020 - Christmas 1

Luke 2:22-40

The Gospel story for this day is a famous one. It narrates the presentation of Jesus in the temple by Mary and Joseph, 40 days after his birth. There is a separate day, February 2nd, which celebrates The Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple (40 days after December 25th) which

focuses on this portion of the story of Jesus – but it is also read during the Christmas season because of its connection to Jesus’ birth. This passage has several parts that both tell the story and proclaim the deeper meaning of them as part of the unfolding of God’s work of salvation in Jesus.

- “When the days of *her* purification... they brought *Him* to Jerusalem to present *Him* to the Lord.” The occasion given for the trip to Jerusalem has two parts: firstborn sons were considered to belong to the Lord in a special way and were to be “redeemed” with an offering; woman after childbirth were required to purify themselves and then make an offering 40 days later (the “pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons”). Together in this passage they serve to show the obedience and faithfulness of Mary and Joseph in fulfilling the law (Torah) of God – and by extension to show that the entirety of Jesus’ life is in accordance with fulfillment of the scriptures.
- Simeon is described as “righteous and devout” – and “waiting for the Consolation of Israel.” He represents humanity generally and Israel in particular awaiting the fulfillment of God’s promised salvation. But it is the Holy Spirit coming upon him which allows him to recognize Jesus and proclaim him as God’s salvation. The implication of this waiting is that he is watching – looking out for – what God will do. How might we engage prayerfully in a way that opens us to the Holy Spirit so that we may attend to this sort of waiting/watching in our lives and situation – looking for the presence and working of God in our midst?
- “a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Simeon has just said the words that Anglicans have traditionally recited at Evening Prayer, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,...” they declare Jesus as salvation, as the light of revelation for the whole world, and glory of Israel. But then Simeon turns from those sweeter notes to what might be warning. Jesus is also destined “for the fall and rising of many”, will be “spoken against” and a “sword will pierce through your own soul too.” God’s glory and love do not leave us as we are, or call us into simply

basking in a lovely story – they are about the transformation of the world, the judgement of human life and ways – even Mary will be pierced by the agony of her son’s crucifixion. Even in this moment of celebration of a newborn child the cross and resurrection stand at the centre of God’s work of salvation. What are the “thoughts of our hearts (vs. 35) that need to be confronted by God?

- Anna the prophetess often gets less attention in this story – almost like an add on. But her inclusion is so important. She sees, gives thanks, and then goes and tells! The good news is to be shared, and she does. How do we share the good news that we have encountered in Jesus?