

**Third Sunday of Advent – December 17, 2006<sup>1</sup>**  
**Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV**  
**Luke 3:7-18 – John the Baptist Foretells Jesus**

*Kent Higgins*

From the Gospel: *“One who is more powerful than I is coming.”*

Today’s gospel is needs to be put in context. The problem, for me at least at this point in my learning to write sermons, is that there is so much context, that we’re left with little time to talk about the reading itself.

Still, the context setting is necessary. The year is about thirty A D, just before the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The Bible foretells the birth of John, later known as John the Baptizer or the Baptist, in much the same way that the birth of Jesus himself is foretold. John’s father is Zechariah, who was married to Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus: Zechariah has been faithful to God, but as an old man he and his wife remain childless, and they have no hope at their age of having a child.

Zechariah is on duty at the temple, and the angel Gabriel tells him that Elizabeth will bear him a son who is to be named John. The name in Hebrew means “gift of God.” (Jesus, by the way, means “God saves.”)

Gabriel tells Zechariah in Saint Luke’s Gospel: <sup>14</sup>“You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents

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<sup>1</sup> This is my first sermon as a Deacon, having been ordained by Bishop Klusmeyer December 16, 2006, at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV

to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> “

And in due course, Elizabeth conceives. It is she whom Mary visits when she is pregnant with Jesus, and the child John “leaps in his mother’s womb” in the presence of his lord, that is Jesus.

John grows up, and becomes one of the most startling characters of the Bible. This is the fellow who stays out in the desert, wears strange clothes and eats stranger food, and in the end is beheaded because he has offended King Herod and his brother by speaking the truth.

As he preaches in the wilderness, John is indeed filled with the spirit of Elijah. But who is Elijah? More of the background story that we have to fill in to “get” what the original readers understood.

Elijah is the fellow gives Israel a choice: stop worshipping both Yahweh and Baal – choose one or the other. He sets up a contest with the prophets of Baal, recorded in the First Book of Kings, and challenges Baal’s prophets – some four-hundred-and-fifty of them – to see whose God is the more powerful. A bull is prepared as a burnt offering, but instead of using a torch to light the wood around the offering, the idea is that the more powerful God will send flame from heaven to consume the offering.

It’s a marvelously funny story. Baal’s prophets spend hours dancing around – going through their rituals – all to no effect. Then Elijah has his part of the bull placed on an altar, surrounded by wood. But just make sure everyone is impressed, he has the wood soaked in water, so that no torch can light it. He does this not once, but four

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 1:8

times. And the God of the Hebrews, as you no doubt know, sends down fire to consume the bull, the wood, the altar, pretty much everything in sight.

Elijah is the great prophet of Israel. Hebrew tradition is that Elijah – who did not die but was “taken up” into heaven – will return to announce the coming of the Messiah.

And the Messiah, of course, is the promised one who will finally bring freedom to the people of Israel. So the question on everyone’s lips is whether John is Elijah returned, which is to say, is the Messiah coming?

The leaders of the temple in Jerusalem send some folks out to see John, who is angry because he knows the way the temple organization works. The folks in charge expect to conform the Messiah to their wishes. They plan to do a power-sharing arrangement because in their minds, they are entitled to redemption because of who they are – they are “children of Abraham.”

John is not impressed, and tells them God can make “children of Abraham” from the stones that are lying at their feet.

With the “brood of vipers” remark, John is using an illustration that was part of the Hebrew Bible, for both Job and Isaiah<sup>3</sup> cite this particular snake as representing people who are not responding to God’s will. When John says to “<sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance,”<sup>4</sup> he is saying the men from the temple are hypocrites, not carrying out in deeds and actions what they are saying in words.

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<sup>3</sup> Job 20:6, Isaiah 30:6 and 59:5.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 3:8

John's ministry is, as Gabriel told Zechariah, all about getting people interested in the one who will come after him, and to "...make ready a people prepared for the Lord." In conveying that God's kingdom is very near, John is calling people to repent.

The folks from the temple saw no need to repent. They thought that just being who they were was enough to make them acceptable to God. Their view puts themselves, not God, at the center of their supposedly righteous lives. And the whole temple structure equated keeping the Law with gaining salvation. When someone failed to keep one of the rules, he was expected to repent, but this understanding of repentance is to say that we earn our way into God's favor by our own strength. It ignores God's grace in our salvation.

Repentance actually means that we turn toward God, and acknowledge that when we do things displeasing to him, we are standing with our backs to God, denying his role in our lives. We certainly have some things in common with those whom John chastises, for at times we think we control God, not the other way around.

In this Gospel reading, we have a story that reminds us not to think we can rely on our own efforts. It didn't work for Baal's prophets, it won't work for the folks from the temple, and it doesn't work for us.

The question-and-answer section of this Gospel is unique to Saint Luke. You know that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the so-called "synoptic" gospels, sharing many stories in common. But here Luke makes a statement about sharing and being fair to one another that is his statement of the precept we know as the Golden Rule, which Jesus states as "love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Are there those among us who have two coats while we are aware of neighbors who have none? Please understand, this is both a literal and figurative question. Do we have more than we need, but have not shared it with those who do? Almost certainly in

the closets of our lives are some used but still useful articles that we will never use again, but that some one else needs.

Luke shows us what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. He tells us how we are to behave. John the Baptizer is like all good prophets – he himself is not the story – he points the way to the real truth which is Jesus Christ.

If you find yourself on this next-to-last Sunday in Advent still thoroughly distracted by the commercial world of Christmas; if you're still worried about who gets what gift; slow down, pull back, and remember the "brood of vipers." Take a moment to reflect on the one who will follow John, who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit.

We are about to receive the greatest gift it is possible to have. God is coming into, has come into, and will again come into the world. But he wants his rightful place in our whole beings. The call of John to us is that we each prepare a place for the Lord to come, and that place is here, in our hearts, where God longs to live.