

CALL TO WORSHIP | PSALM 80:1-7, 14-19

Listen, Shepherd, Israel's Shepherd—
get all your Joseph sheep together.

Throw beams of light
from your dazzling throne

So Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh
can see where they're going.

Get out of bed—you've slept long enough!
Come on the run before it's too late.

God, turn back!
Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.

God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies,
how long will you smolder like a sleeping volcano
while your people call for fire and brimstone?

You put us on a diet of tears,
bucket after bucket of salty tears to drink.

You make us look ridiculous to our friends;
our enemies poke fun day after day.

God-of-the-Angel-Armies, turn us back!
Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.

Take a good look at what's happened
and attend to this vine.

Care for what you once tenderly planted—
the vine you raised from a shoot.

And those who dared to set it on fire—
give them a look that will kill!

Then take the hand of your once-favorite child,
the child you raised to adulthood.

We will never turn our back on you;
breathe life into our lungs so we can shout your name!

God, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, turn us back again!
Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.

SONG: O Come O Come Emmanuel

WREATH LIGHTING | HOPE

Today we, alongside millions of Jesus followers of every tribe, tongue, and nation worldwide, officially begin our countdown to December 25th. The celebration of Jesus' birth, the "Feast of the Nativity," as some traditions refer to the 25th day of the twelfth month, has been apart of our faith heritage as far back as the fourth century. For nearly 1600 years, we have celebrated the light of the world shining on the darkest day of the year.

Yet from the start, the actual date of Jesus' arrival has been a point of argument amongst churchmen and scholars alike. While a fixed date finds little consensus, most agree that our long-held practice of "the December celebration may have more to with baptizing the Saturnalian winter festivals [of the Romans] and allowing some continuity for newly converted pagans than with any firm knowledge of the date fo Jesus' birth."¹

While the historical guesses at the day of Jesus' first cries range from late spring to early winter, a growing contention over the years has argued for a Fall birthdate. And while such a change in our festivities calendar would certainly upset our expectations and "holy habits," David Baird makes the point that even an Incarnation in autumn still holds as much seasonal symbolism as the 25th day of December. Baird writes,

Was certainly not winter, scholars say,
When holy habitation broke the chill
Of hearth-felt separation, icy still,
The love of life in man that Christmas day.
Was autumn, rather, if seasons speak true;
When green retreats from sight's still ling'ring gaze
And creeping cold numbs sense in sundry ways,
While settling silence speaks of solitude.
Hope happens when conditions are as these;
Comes finally lock-armed with death and sin,
When deep'ning dark demands its full display.
Then fallen nature driven to her knees
Flames russet, auburn, orange fierce from within,
And bush burns brighter for the growing grey.

'Hope happens when conditions are as these.' Advent begins, not in the festivities of twinkling lights, wondrously adorned trees, and wrapped gifts of hidden delight, but in the evidence of Fall (the fall), 'lock-armed with death and sin.' When the burning desire for something different, for a separation from the cold signs of seasons changing, is met with icy chill rather than a warm fire. When the creeping cold numbs our senses in various ways to the abundance of life, we once knew. When deep'ning darkness of isolation demands full display, this is when hope happens. Hope happens, and the fallen nature is 'driven to her knees,'

¹ Guite,, 57.

to a position of worship from within as the burning bush of “I am’s” presence shines brighter in the growing grey.

Advent is a season of anticipation, of expectant arrival of that which is most desperately needed. Tis the season to remember that hope happens when the conditions are clear that it is needed. Malcolm Guite comments on Baird’s poem, helping us anticipate the “Hope happen[ing] when conditions are as these,” among us, around us, in 2020.

The idea of hope ‘lock-armed with death and sin’ is both striking and, I think, deliberately ambiguous. Are they ‘lock-armed’ in the sense that they are locked in mortal combat, with a possible residual play on the word ‘armed’? Are they ‘lock-armed’ in the sense of Jacob and his wrestling angel, that one will not let the other go until some healing happens? Hope, even in the deepening dark, will not abandon death and sin. The breaking of the chill, and the making of holy habitation, mean that experiences of sin and death need not be hopeless.²

And it is this ‘lock-armed’ hope which arrived most brightly in Jesus that we set aflame today with the lighting of our first Advent candle. Pray with me.

SONG: Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

PRE-SERMON READING | MATTHEW 11:2-15

John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?”

Jesus told them, “Go back and tell John what’s going on:

The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

“Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!”

When John’s disciples left to report, Jesus started talking to the crowd about John. “What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That’s right, a prophet!

² Ibid., 58.

Probably the best prophet you'll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, 'I'm sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.'

"Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him. For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God's kingdom. But if you read the books of the Prophets and God's Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom. Looked at in this way, John is the 'Elijah' you've all been expecting to arrive and introduce the Messiah.

"Are you listening to me? Really listening?"

SERMONETTE | ISRAEL'S HOPER

2020 has been a most unusual year! Very few of our traditions have been experienced traditionally, so why change things up now! While our customary practice is to tell the stories of the main characters of Jesus' birth—Joseph, Mary, the wise men, and shepherds as such—perhaps this year more than most, we need the story of crazy cousin John. John's manner and habits don't exactly fit the family mold. He is prone to step on and step over the line of expected behavior. Yet his actions lack all insincerity. He may empty his pooper in the storm drain, but he also takes action to change the family's future.

He's in all the original Christmas stories, by the way, but often makes his way off stage before the action gets too far underway. But we must remember, there is no Christmas story without cousin John the Baptizer. As Walter Brueggemann contends, "John is the one who gets everything ready [the vary purpose of Advent!]; you cannot jump into the goodness of Christmas without readiness from him."³

Though our passage this morning takes place many years after Jesus' marvelous and common birth, it is through Jesus' questions that we come to recognize the role of John in incarnation's play, and thus his importance for Advent. In our passage, Jesus asks the people enamored if not shocked by John, but like John are also wondering about Jesus, who do they think John is?

What did you expect, asks Jesus, when you left the intermingled politics and religion of the city, and you're your way to the camel hair coated monastic? Did you expect to find a frail, timid monk, too quiet and gentle to disturb the status quo? Did you expect a royal ambassador, a priestly prince, all decked out with the proper attire to show off the abundance of religious piety?

Similarly, Jesus could ask those questions of our clothed expectation of Christmas. Has the holy story of Christmas lost its ruggedness, been quieted by contemplation and isolation from the everyday affairs of life under another oppressive empire? Has Christmas been dressed to the nines, fitted with every garb of plentitude that the cry to which Christmas is God's response has been overshadowed by cultural and religious indulgences?

³ Brueggemann, 40.

If we expect Advent to be a quiet and solitary reflection or an overindulgence of abundance (as my cheese, wine, beer, and chocolate advent calendars suggest!), then we will not find what we are searching for in the wilderness of John the baptizer. But, if we were looking for a prophet, ‘the best prophet you’ll ever hear,’ then that is exactly what we’ll find in both John and Advent. A prophet who prepares the way of the Messiah, the good news himself.

But before we do what too often do, and shift our focus from the prophet to the manger, let's remember what prophets are. The prophets were, and continue to be, “Israel’s demanders...Israel’s summoners...Israel’s *hoppers*.”⁴

The prophets, as Brueggemann notes, remind God’s people that we must face the demands of God’s Word, his commands of justice and mercy and “neighborliness.” Demands to love one another as we have been loved. Demands to take individual risks for the sake of the community.

The prophets, in their reminder of the demands of our faith, summon us to change, to repent. They summon us to turn away from the fast track of the world, to the patient realities of neighborliness and humanness and compassion and justice, the way of our Father.

While prophets remind us of the demands of our faith and summon us to grab hold of those ways in joyous obedience, they do so with eyes fixed “on God’s future, the newness God will give.” Prophets are, above all else, Israel’s *hoppers*. They can see the world as it could and should be, as God intends and is action to make be.

But here is the thing, Jesus calls cousin John “more than a prophet,” “the best prophet you’ll ever hear,” “among those born of women, no one” greater, yet who “the lowliest person is ahead,” in the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because John, like Advent, is not only reminding us of the demands of a relationship with God and another, not only summoning us to turn and take hold of the way of life now and forever, but he is preparing the way for the future. John prepares the way for newness, for...

The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed, [outsiders made insiders]
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

What John had been preparing was growing like a mustard seed, though John found himself wondering if it had really taken root. John, like Advent, prepares the way for the realization of hope. But notice where John is; he is in prison. His actions to ensure the family’s good future, his cousin’s good future, have landed him in jail and got him doubting how near the future really was. A doubt many of us today share.

John, the demander, the summoner, the prophet, the hopper, is imprisoned for the very work of preparation—having tried to remind and summon the acculturated leadership of their God-created place. While his role of preparation has been significant and necessary, elevating him to such praise as Jesus offers, the urgency and anticipation which he builds are not greater than what has come out of Bethlehem. The reminders and

⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

repentance are necessary, yet “Greater are those who believe and practice the newness,” for which John hoped. The least and lowliest, the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, and the dead, find out through the carpenter’s so that God is really on their side.

“These weeks of Advent,” encourages Brueggemann, “are a time to stand with John in jail and look to the newness,”⁵ especially in the year 2020. To wonder if what we hope for is near, and, like John to hear Jesus describe that hope happens in conditions such as these, lock-armed with death and sin, till we are driven to our knees in worship of the God who has heard our cries and come near. Let those who have ears to hear, listen, really listen, this Advent season.

Pray with me.

SONG: Light of the World

COMMUNION | CANTICLE 16

In the Episcopal and some Anglican traditions, their liturgical calendar encourages the reading/singing of certain “canticles” on the Sundays of Advent. A canticle is a hymn or [chant](#), typically with a biblical text, forming a regular part of a church service. This Advent season, we’ll join with our sisters and brothers in making the canticles a part of our Gatherings.

Today, we’ll chant a song from John the baptizer’s father, Zechariah. A song found in Luke’s Christmas story (1:68-79). Zechariah sang this song over John as a baby, and I am sure many many many times afterward. John would have heard these words sung over and for him throughout his growing up. John’s song is both a source of his encouragement and cause of his doubt and wonder, a song of promise and hope and expectation that we too can cry out as praise and protest, now and always, until Jesus’ second Advent fully arrives.

I’ll read the bulk of the hymn; then we’ll say together the highlighted portion.

Canticle 16, The Song of Zechariah

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty savior,
born of the house of his servant David.
Through his holy prophets, he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us.
He promised to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,

⁵ Ibid., 41.

to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight
all of the days of our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
To give his people knowledge salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

SONG: To Thee We Run

SCRIPTURE READING | ISAIAH 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rip open the heavens and descend,
make the mountains shudder at your presence—
As when a forest catches fire,
as when fire makes a pot to boil—
To shock your enemies into facing you,
make the nations shake in their boots!
You did terrible things we never expected,
descended and made the mountains shudder at your presence.
Since before time began
no one has ever imagined,
No ear heard, no eye seen, a God like you
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who happily do what is right,
who keep a good memory of the way you work.
But how angry you've been with us!
We've sinned and kept at it so long!

Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved?
We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated.
Our best efforts are grease-stained rags.
We dry up like autumn leaves—
sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind.
No one prays to you
or makes the effort to reach out to you
Because you've turned away from us,
left us to stew in our sins.

Still, God, you are our Father.
We're the clay and you're our potter:
All of us are what you made us.
Don't be too angry with us, O God.
Don't keep a permanent account of wrongdoing.
Keep in mind, please, we *are* your people—all of us.

SONG: Immanuel

BENEDICTION | 1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

May all the gifts and benefits that come from God our Father, and the Master, Jesus Christ, be yours.

Every time I think of you—and I think of you often!—I thank God for your lives of free and open access to God, given by Jesus. There's no end to what has happened in you—it's beyond speech, beyond knowledge. The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives.

Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.