

**Bruton Parish Church
The Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2009
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson**

In the name and for the glory of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. † Amen.

The Advent season is a season of reflection and repentance, but more importantly, it is a season of anticipation, expectation, and hopeful excitement for a promised future of redemption. It is not a time for sadness and gloom, but rather a time to expect and to look to the coming light. We increase the light once more as we look forward.

Now most of us are excited about the coming joy of Christmas, both because of the religious significance of the coming Christ child, and the just sheer joy associated with our cultural celebration - bright lights, tinsel, carols, bells, and the giving and receiving of gifts. Maybe even the crowded stores and the traffic jams hold a charm for some of you.

It would be easy to focus all of our sense of expectation in Advent upon the Christmas Day and all that it symbolizes. The problem with that is that once Christmas Day arrives, what then? What happens in such a focus, when the expectation of that day is passed? It can be, and sometimes is quite a letdown for people.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, as with all Gospel readings from the Second Sunday of Advent, focuses upon the character of John the Baptist.

Luke spends a significant effort placing the historical context around John – it is the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was the Judean Governor and Herod ruled Galilee. Herod's brother ruled nearby Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruled in Abilene. In addition to the Roman and Jewish political leaders, Luke names the religious power brokers in the persons of the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas.

In the midst of this specific place and time and under these specific circumstances, John speaks truth to all of this power. That speaking of the truth ultimately costs him his life and it costs the life of the one that he will introduce. It seems the way of the prophets is often to pay with their lives for the message they bring.

But what is the central message this wild and wooly prophet brings? Is it just for this people, faced with these circumstances in this troubled time? He well may have thought so. It might have been in his heart that soon the oppression would cease and the people would be delivered from tyranny.

But consider the words of the prophetic utterance of John.

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and

the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation¹ of God.”

It sounds much like the previous utterances by different prophets in different times and in different places. It is very like what we read in the reading from Baruch, a scribal assistant to the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah prophesied in a time of great suffering, of sin and rebellion to God, ultimately culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem. It is the time of the Babylonian exile, 500 hundred years before John the Baptist.

Baruch 5:7 – “... for God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be **made low** and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.”

It is further reminiscent of, and in fact is attributed to, the words recorded in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, an earlier prophetic declaration from some 200 years before Jeremiah and Baruch. Isaiah 40:4 –“... every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be **made low**; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

Another difficult place, another difficult time, and another promise of deliverance.

And now, it is John’s time and place and it is in anticipation of the coming Son of God, of Jesus.

The promise of the level and straight places includes the promise of deliverance. But Luke claims this rescue, this deliverance, for all flesh.²

It is:

“...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke imagines a universal (all flesh) realization of the salvation of God – for all people and all time.

¹ 26204 σωτήριος, ον of what is related to the means of salvation *rescuing, bringing salvation, delivering* (TI 2.11); neuter as a substantive τὸ σωτήριον *the (messianic) salvation* (LU 3.6); by metonymy, the Messiah himself as mediating *salvation or deliverance* (LU 2.30)

² 35921 σάρξ, ΣΑ ΡΞ

ΣΑ ΡΞ, ἡ, (σαρκός) *flesh*, Lat. caro, Hom., etc.: in plur. *the flesh or muscles* of the body, ἔγκατά τε σάρκας τε καὶ ὀστέα Hom.; so in Hes., Aesch., etc.:—so sometimes in sing., *the flesh, the body*, γέροντα τὸν νοῦν, σάρκα δ’ ἠβῶσαν φέρει Aesch.

II. *the flesh*, as opp. to the spirit, N.T.; also for *man's nature generally*, Ib.; πᾶσα σάρξ *all human kind*, Ib.

Luke takes the long view with John- - - - the prophesy is not just to the people of Isaiah's day, or of those in the day of Jeremiah and Baruch, and not just to those gathered around John for baptism, but to all humankind for all time.

We rely on that – we place our faith in that fact.

So this Advent hope is not just to Christmas but from the historical context of John, of Jeremiah, of Isaiah to all people of all times. God forgives (renews, restores, mends, heals) our brokenness, our incompleteness, our frailty and delivers and rescues us from our crooked places, our valleys, mountains, and rugged places.

Our hope of advent is in to the New Year and the next, and the many ones after that and for all of human history – salvation and deliverance has come and is coming to humankind – John is promising us that the Christ is coming and bringing this deliverance to us and to all.

The people of Isaiah's time had their turmoil and trouble and yet this promise was true, the people in Jeremiah's time were in exile and yet this promise was true, the people to whom John preached were oppressed and down trodden and yet this promise was true.

In our time, we can point to great trouble and disagreement, but still, I assure you, this promise is true.

We all read and hear of the complex issues on the world stage – many speak with equal self-assurance of opposite solutions and many wonder if there are any solutions at all, but still the promise is true.

We read of turmoil and agony in our own Church. Whole congregations deciding to go separate ways, and thereby somehow serve God more truly. Still the promise is true.

These are troubled times in the world and in the Church. It has always been thus, and still this promise is true.

We are in our Advent, not looking forward just to Christmas and new birth, but beyond to every day and every age. We are the people of hope and still the voice cries in the wilderness that the way of the Lord is being prepared, the paths will be straightened, the ground will be leveled and smoothed, and indeed all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Find hope in that promise. It is still true.

Blessed be the name of God.