

Bill Countryman

Good Shepherd Berkeley

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Year C: Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Every year, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we come back round to John the Baptist. And that makes sense. Christians have long revered him as the Forerunner of Jesus, and so it's only right that he should put in an appearance when we're focusing on Jesus' advent—whether we're thinking mainly of his coming as the infant of Bethlehem or of his coming in majesty as this age gives way to the age to come.

The thing that our gospel readings always emphasize when they speak of John is the message of baptism and forgiveness. "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So today I want to focus our attention on what *forgiveness* has to do with the advent of Christ—then or now or in the future.

We also had a reference to forgiveness in the Canticle we read together this morning (16, BCP p. 92). Do you remember the back-story on that poem? It's the song that John's father Zechariah sang in celebration of John's birth. Zechariah, according to Luke's Gospel, was an aged priest. One day when he was the only priest in the Temple, where he was burning incense, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him he and his wife Elizabeth would soon have a son. He told the angel that was impossible because they were too old. And Gabriel said, "Because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." When Zechariah finally came out of the Temple, everybody could see something big had happened to him, but he couldn't tell them what it was.

Finally, on the day of John's birth, he regains his speech and he celebrates God's redemptive generosity, God's salvation, in other words:

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.

Then, in the second part of the poem, Zechariah speaks directly to the new baby, John, and foretells his future:

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 of *salvation*

by the *forgiveness* of their sins.

John's work will be to offer "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins."

So now we have two important words to focus on: forgiveness and salvation.

Two big words: salvation and forgiveness. What are they about and why do they get linked here?

We Episcopalians are sometimes a little shy of talking about salvation. We shouldn't be. Salvation is as important as it's ever been in human history. Let's just name a few situations that are really ripe for a bit of salvation: Afghanistan; Iraq; Richmond; Oakland; the US health care system; the world economy; the job market; the environment; the California budget; the Anglican Communion. Even things that are not in desperate circumstances could still use some help; so let's give ourselves and Good Shepherd a modest spot down in the corner of the picture, too. And I would guess everyone here was adding in a few other things as I went along there. We wouldn't have time to go through the whole list, would we? There's a lot about this world and this life that's really wonderful. There's a lot to give thanks over. And there's also a lot that's in real trouble. Don't tell me that salvation is an outmoded notion.

Of course, you may have thought that I was going to talk about being saved from the danger of going to Hell. No. It might even be a little selfish for us to be worrying too much about our individual souls when the whole world seems to be going to Hell in a hand basket. So even if it's been a long-standing tradition in Christianity, I'm not willing to define salvation purely in terms of passing the great graduate exam in the sky. What a trivialization of the whole idea!

I'm not downplaying our hope for the age to come. I'm just saying that we need to be looking for hope and living hope in this world, too.

The reading from Baruch this morning was expressing a hope for some very serious, this-worldly salvation. Someone wrote these words in the context of a shattered, desolate Jerusalem to help people imagine liberation and restoration:

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting.

Beautiful!

And, in our day, Jerusalem still needs salvation, but the salvation will have to look a little different if it's going to mean anything now. It won't be enough for God just to bring back the

exiles of Israel. God will need to bring back the exiles of Palestine, too. And somehow, those two peoples, those two sets of exiles, who have been enemies for almost a century now, will have to learn to live with each other in peace. That would be salvation!

Now, if I were you, sitting out there right now, I might be saying to myself, “*That* would be a pipedream.” Yes, it seems like it, doesn’t it? But can you think of any other sort of salvation that would mean anything at all? Jerusalem as it now is has at least two families to weep over, two families at each other’s throats. Salvation for Jerusalem has to mean salvation for both.

But where is it going to come from? One thing we can be pretty sure of is that Jesus is not going to part the heavens and come down with armies of angels and knock heads. It’s an appealing idea, in some ways, and it sells lots of books for certain popular authors. But Jesus has had lots of provocations over the centuries, and if this were the way he wanted to bring salvation, one has to think that we would have seen some of it by now.

So if we take John as our guide, how might God’s salvation work? How does it come about?

Zechariah said to John:

you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

To give his people knowledge of salvation

by the forgiveness of their sins.

This means that, if you want to know what salvation is, look first at the generosity of God. God is so generous that he will even forgive your sins, great or small, many or few. Zechariah knew what he was talking about, didn’t he? He had been silenced because he refused to trust God. But then he experienced salvation: God forgave him and gave him back his voice.

God doesn’t deal out salvation as a reward for our goodness. God gives it as a sign of God’s own unfathomable generosity, a generosity so extreme that it even forgives our wrongs.

There is a catch, of course. God’s generosity forces a choice on us. You can either sponge off that generosity or you can try to live up to it. If you just sponge off it and take advantage of it, you’ll find yourself in a downward spiral, because human beings aren’t built to live that way. When we live like sponges, eventually we begin to hate ourselves for it. We even get so sour, eventually, that we wouldn’t recognize salvation if we fell over it.

Alternatively, you can try to live up to it. I know if God is this generous to me, it’s because God is this generous to everybody. And, much as I may dislike it at times, the only way

to live in God's friendship is to behave like a friend, to share some of God's goodness to me with others, to look for some kind of salvation that can embrace them as well as me.

In other words, I can start learning how to forgive. I can start learning how to have some genuine good will even toward people who have hurt me. Sometimes, that's very hard to do. In some cases, it may take years of prayer just to get started. And forgiving doesn't mean that I will go into denial about wrongs done to me or that I will take stupid chances with people who have given clear evidence of ill will. But it does mean that, as I learn to imitate God by forgiving, I begin to see openings on hope as well as memories of evil.

When people begin to forgive, salvation becomes a possibility. We find we can come together to restore damaged relationships. Jerusalem can have all her children back. The experience of forgiveness gives us, as Zechariah put it, "the knowledge of salvation." That's how we learn to recognize it. And once we learn to recognize it, we can begin to participate in it.

We Christians have this message as our greatest treasure, but we keep losing track of it and distorting it. Sometimes, we make God sound more like Genghis Khan than like Jesus. But here with us, today, we have Zechariah and John the Baptist to remind us that this isn't Genghis Khan whose advent we'll be celebrating at Christmas. The Jesus who came at Bethlehem and will come again at the juncture of the ages comes to forgive and to reconcile. And that's the kind of salvation the whole world needs.