



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, December 9, 2018

The Second Sunday of Advent

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Malachi 3:1-4 | Canticle 16 | Philippians 1:3-11 | Luke 3:1-6

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

With a touch of grandiosity, St. Luke introduces a simple country preacher named John: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius...” and on and on with a catalogue of the political players of the day. We end up with John son of Zechariah, who never met Tiberius Caesar or even Pontius Pilate. He never made it to Rome. He did meet up with Herod, and that brush with imperial power cost him his head. But that was in a time when preaching was a more serious business and prophets were heard, and often feared.

By the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, with the Roman Empire living under a tense peace, his rule was more than half over. Before coming to the throne, Tiberius secured the northern borders, keeping the Barbarians quiet for a few generations. Roman domination spread into the East where various groups, the Jews among them, were placed under the Emperor's thumb. With all fairly quiet on various fronts, Tiberius came to the throne in his late fifties. He then exiled or assassinated most of his enemies and close relatives, and proceeded to spend the remainder of his years exploring his various appetites and vices. With Tiberius, the glory that was once Rome slowly began to fade.

Into this world, seemingly out of nowhere, a voice recalled ancient words: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Most people ignored John. His preaching didn't disturb the occupying Romans, so they didn't disturb him. Tiberius didn't even know of John's existence. Herod heard of him and was at first intrigued, until John publically condemned Herod's sins – among them things like murdering his brother and then taking his widow for his own wife. Then the preaching got a little too close to home.

John had the unenviable task of being a messenger in a time and place where few wanted to listen. He didn't have easy answers. He was not the messiah; he could not get rid of the Romans; he could not solve the problems of peoples' lives. All he could do was point to the One who was to come, to the One who would bring salvation.

Many of the people who gathered around John at the Jordan wanted a revolution – get rid of the Romans, establish a secure, free Israel. To them that would be the ultimate

sign of God's power. A victory of great earthly might. All the prophets who came before John faced the same conflict – there was always an enemy to overthrow, a problem to solve, an expectation that wrongs would be corrected. What many people wanted were simple solutions, while John was offering salvation. It's an old story.

Armies have marched, prayers have been offered, knowledge exploited, campaigns run, all in search of solutions that should miraculously set all things right. ‘If only we can overcome _____’ you can fill in the blank. What is it? Disease, poverty, racism, hunger, terrorism, partisanship? The assumption is that once we fix whatever ‘it’ is, we can relax and bask in the satisfaction that we have done it ourselves by our own wit and determination. While these are laudable goals, something else has to happen first. God's messengers remind us that the world's problems will never be resolved until our own souls are made whole.

John the Baptist never tried to explain why the world is the way it is, why injustice is the law of the land, why suffering is the way of life, other than to say that sin has the world in its grip. To free our own souls from this deadly force, John urges us to look beyond ourselves, beyond simple solutions to an eternal salvation that comes from God. John was not a reformer, prophets never are. They don't lead movements, or abolish social ills, or solve anything. They tell us what we have become – sinners in need of repentance and salvation – and they call us back to who we are supposed to be – forgiven and redeemed children of God. That's a very personal message about me, not the other guy, not the enemy. The action John is calling for has to start with me. The heart that needs to be healed is my own. No one wants to hear that message, it hits too close to home, which is why prophets have such short careers. But whether we ignore him, or silence him, or overlook him, the prophet's message still resounds and can be heard by those who yearn for the power of God to transform their lives.

Of those who held earthly power around John, none of them came to a good end or found answers to their own life's problems. Annas and Caiaphas were thrown out of their priestly office and what was thought to be their eternal Temple was flattened by the Roman army. Lysanias disappeared into obscurity. Within five years of John's

death, Philip dies without heirs and his kingdom is absorbed by Syria. Herod, who could never heed a warning, got too ambitious and was deposed, then exiled to Gaul. Pilate's stormy governance of Judea ended with his shameful recall to Rome. He's only remembered now as the man who sentenced Jesus to death. Tiberius died a despised, lonely, old man who lost control of himself and all that he had built, and whose empire had begun a slow, steady decline.

The powerful, both big and small, are now largely forgotten. What we do remember about them is their worst. They sought meaning in power, empty pleasures and wealth and ended up with little more than suffering to show for their efforts. They never found the solutions they sought because they could see nothing beyond themselves. That was their destruction.

All the while the simple voice of the prophet lives on and calls us to something higher, something eternal, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."