



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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**A Sermon for the
Third Sunday in Advent**
Isaiah 35:1-10, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5,
St. Matthew 11:2-10
Fr. William Klock

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Many years ago, as we were driving home from church on a Sunday morning, a very young Alexandra asked, “Dad, can Episcopalians cry?” I thought, “What? Of course we can. What makes you ask that?” And she said something to the effect of, “The song said the Baptists cried” “Ah! ‘On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry...’ and I found myself trying to figure out how to explain plurals and possessives and punctuation to a pre-schooler who couldn’t read yet, and in the end I said something like—“No, the song is about John the Baptist, not Baptists, and he wasn’t crying because he was sad, he was crying—like yelling out—to the crowds about how, in Jesus, God had come to save his people like he’d promised, so they’d better get ready by getting rid of their sins.”

That hymn was written by Charles Coffin in 1736 for the Paris Breviary and was a hymn to be sung at Lauds—more or less what we call Morning Prayer—during Advent. And it wonderfully blends the account of John the Baptist that we have in the Gospels with Isaiah’s prophecies of the coming Messiah, his call to make straight the way of the Lord, and his promises of forgiveness and reconciliation, of healing and new creation. Maybe it’s because we reference the hymn by its first line, but somehow that first line—little Alexandra wasn’t the only one—lots of people hear that first line and imagine poor John sobbing on the banks of the Jordan river, when what we’re singing about is John, proclaiming with an urgent joy the

coming of the Messiah and the fulfilment of Israel’s hopes and longings.

*For thou art our salvation Lord,
Our refuge and our great reward:
Without thy grace we waste away
Like flowers that wither and decay.*

*To heal the sick stretch out thine hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let thy light restore
Earth’s own true loveliness once
more.*

It’s certainly an appropriate image for this season of Advent as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus *and* are reminded about the *vocation* he’s given us to prepare ourselves and his creation for the day when he returns. But I still wrestle with this passage and with today’s Epistle from 1 Corinthians 11, every time the Third Sunday in Advent rolls around. Last week’s lessons are some of my favourites. They remind us how important it is that we know and root ourselves in the story of God and his people. But I always find today’s lessons hard. First we hear Paul rebuking the Corinthian Christians. They’d rejected his authority and he writes them to say, “Hey, that’s not the way I should be treated. You *need* to regard me a servant of the Messiah and steward of God’s mysteries. Who are you to judge me?” If we didn’t know better we might think Paul’s head was a little swollen. And then in the Gospel we’ve got Jesus defending John the Baptist and his calling and ministry.

And I know that the reason these lessons were appointed for the Third Sunday in Advent is because this is an ember week, one of those weeks that most people have forgotten about, that come around four times a year—the times when ordinations traditionally took place. And so the lessons were chosen to remind us of the importance of those who serve as ministers in the church. We prayed in the Collect, “Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may so prepare and

make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight.” That’s a good thing to pray. I hope that you pray for me and that you pray for our bishops and for those who lead and teach in our church—and all the churches. But I get kind of uncomfortable standing at the pulpit and suggesting that I—or any other clergyman, by he a presbyter or a bishop—can talk that way about my ministry the way Paul could speak about his apostolic ministry and authority. That was a unique authority given to Paul and the other apostles and to no one since. Our duty—both mine and yours—is simply to faithfully proclaim the faith given to us by those uniquely authoritative apostles. Ditto for Jesus’ defense of John the Baptist. I hope with all my heart that if a crowd of people were doubting my faithfulness, that Jesus was come to my defense. But I can’t presume to talk as if Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel mean that you all should see and respect me as a modern-day John the Baptist. Every year when this set of lessons comes around, I can’t help but think of the words of our Declaration of Principles, where it says that “this church condemns and rejects the following erroneous and strange doctrines as contrary to God’s word...” And the second of those erroneous and strange doctrines is “That Christian ministers are ‘priests’ in another sense than that in which all believers are a ‘royal priesthood’.”

Brother and Sisters, together we are the body of Jesus the Messiah. Some of us are ears or eyes, some hands or feet, some hearts or brains. I may have pastoral training and authority granted by the church to teach and to administer the sacraments, but that doesn’t make me more important. The church, to be the church, needs all of us. And the really important thing that we really need—all of us—to do is not to treat our pastors or our bishops as if they carry Paul’s apostolic authority.

What we need to do is to see ourselves—all of us—in the same place as the Corinthians and submit ourselves to that apostolic teaching handed down by Paul and Peter and John and the rest of the apostles.

Because our witness depends on it. God's kingdom depends on it. We are the stewards of the good news and we're stewards of God's Spirit. We are the stewards of his kingdom and his new creation. And as Paul writes, "it's required of stewards that they be found trustworthy". When Paul writes "steward" he's describing the manager of a household or an estate. Think of Joseph, Potiphar's steward, put in charge of everything he owned, responsible for how it was all managed, responsible for the profits and losses, responsible for making sure all of Potiphar's assets were put to good and efficient use and not wasted, squandered, or damaged. That's what Paul saw himself as when it came to the mysteries of God. And not some highfalutin executive, but as a humble slave, graciously chosen by God to steward the gospel.

And because you and I have been entrusted with that same gospel—handed down by Paul and Peter and John and the other apostles—we've become stewards too. Not with the apostolic authority that Paul had and the ability to announce "Thus saith the Lord." But still a people called to work in the Lord's household or in his vineyard, entrusted with his mysteries—with the gospel, with his grace, with his Spirit—and called, each of us in our own way, to steward the Lord's good things faithfully.

When we look at First and Second Corinthians, the folks in that church weren't doing a very good job. Picture them. A small church—probably a few dozen people at most. Most of the people in it were converts from paganism. They used to worship false gods who represented things like sex, knowledge, money, war, power, government. The Corinthians all had

their favourite sins: lying, cheating, anger, pornography, drunkenness, drugs, adultery. You name it, they'd done it—often as part of their worship. But then this funny Jewish man showed up preaching a bizarre message about the God of Israel and his son, the Messiah—the anointed king—who had been crucified and then raised from death. And this man, Paul, he'd been abused, beaten, stoned, left for dead so many times for the sake of this message, this "good news" he was so earnest about. He was a little frightening to look at, because he literally bore the marks of this gospel, the marks of Jesus on his own body. But this good news was unlike any news they'd ever heard before. This God, this Jesus, was unlike any god they'd ever worshiped. He brought love, mercy, grace, and hope into a world of darkness, greed, selfishness, and brutality. In Paul they saw and in hearing the good news he announced, they met God's new world and they were won over. They were baptised into this God who is Father, Son, and Spirit and the new creation begun by Jesus was born in them. Paul stayed and he taught them and they grew in Jesus and the Spirit. And they lived as a little pocket of God's new age right there in the midst of brutal, wicked, dark, pagan Corinth. And then Paul moved on. And they started to struggle. The temptations of their old pagan ways came back—as so often happens. The new life of Jesus and the Spirit—so thrilling at first—became hum-drum and they started seeking after new experiences and new excitements. That resulted in factions in the church: this group became a fan of *that* preacher and that group became fans of *this* preacher. In the name of Christian liberty they became tolerant of sin—even some that were unspeakable to the pagans. And that led to further divisions. They began to use the gifts the Spirit had given them, not to build up the church, but to build up themselves. Their worship became chaotic and dishonouring to God. And when Paul heard what was happening and wrote

to them. Think of Advent. He wrote to them: "Hey, you're living like you're still part of the old evil age, subject to the old false gods and the principalities and powers that Jesus defeated at the cross. You're supposed to be living as heralds of God's new creation! You're supposed to be a church full of John the Baptists, crying out, announcing that the Lord is night!" And they wrote back a nasty letter telling him they were done with him—they didn't want to hear his "correction" anymore. They had grown beyond his teaching and they were doing well on their own, thank you very much!

And I think we tend to read about the Corinthians think, "Wow, what horrible Christians!" And yet, I don't know that the modern church is all that different. It's full of quarrelling and divisions. We're jealous of other pastor's or other church's successes. We use the gifts God has given to benefit ourselves rather than the body. We lack holiness. We're worldly. We lie, we cheat, we steal, and we exploit in our business. Our families are often a mess. Unrepentant divorce is rampant. Sexual immorality, pornography, drugs and drunkenness, abortion are nearly as prevalent in the church as they are in the world. Bishops and presbyters abuse and lie and plagiarise and get drunk and engage in sexual immorality. We say we've given our allegiance to Jesus, but we sell ourselves out to the materialistic and consumeristic and individualistic and political spirits of the age. We take our cues from advertising and become dissatisfied with what God has given us and where he's placed us. We take our cues from politicians instead of the Bible. We see evil in the world, we see injustice in the world and instead of speaking out or doing something about it, we look the other way and refuse to act. Our worship is too often chaotic and man-centred rather than God- and gospel-centred. We preach self-help instead of sin and grace, the cross and new creation. Brothers and Sisters,

the church is supposed to be the advance guard of God's new creation. It's supposed to be his temple, the place where God and man, where heaven and earth meet. We've been entrusted with the mysteries of God. But we're too much like the old creation. Our allegiance is half-hearted. We are unfaithful stewards, squandering the gifts of God. The principalities and powers of the old age often rule and govern the church more than Jesus and the Spirit do. I don't think it's any wonder that—to use the analogy of John's vision in Revelation—I don't think it's any great wonder that Jesus seems to be taking away our lampstand here in the post-Christian West.

And I know there's little if anything you and I can do about *the* church on a large scale, but we've been entrusted with our little corner of the church and we *can* do something about that. Advent reminds us that as Israel was to listen to men like John the Baptist and prepare for Jesus first coming, the church now needs to listen to the scriptures—to the prophets and apostles—and prepare for Jesus' return. As Paul warned the Corinthians that they needed to heed his apostolic authority, he might as well be warning us, too. Hear the apostles and hear the prophets—and don't just hear; *do*. Hear the words of Isaiah we read today: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of the Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God."

Maybe that doesn't mean much to us today, but for people who lived in the desert, those were words of hope. New creation was coming. God has promised to come and set the world to rights. To bring his people back to the garden to live in his presence. And so Isaiah tells them, "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble

knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

Don't be discouraged. Don't lose hope. Don't forget his promises. Don't forget to whom you belong. Don't give up on your holy vocation. Don't forget that you are stewards of the good things of God for the sake of the world. What he has promised he will do. He will not let you thirst in the desert forever. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

John the Baptist saw that in Jesus God was beginning to fulfil this promise. In fact, what John saw in Jesus—preaching good news, healing the sick, casting out demons—looked so much like the fulfilment of God's promises made through Isaiah and the other prophets, that he had confidence to announce to Israel that the kingdom was at hand. It gave him the confidence to preach, not just the joyful part of Isaiah's message, but to also declare the part about God's judgement coming and to call the people to repentance in preparation.

He was confident enough that he even called out King Herod's personal sins. And that landed him in Herod's dungeon. But when Jesus didn't break him out, he started to wonder. I don't know that he really doubted the message, but it seems like he began to wonder and so he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one or should we look for someone else?" And Jesus reminded them of all the Messiah things he'd been doing. The blind received their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, even the dead are raised, and the poor are hearing good news for the first time. And in case the crowds were doubting, Jesus reminded them of the absolute certainty John had shown. "What did you go out to the wilderness to see?" he asked them. Not a reed flapping in the wind. Not some fop dressed in fine clothes. You can find that in Herod's palace. No, you went out to see a prophet—to see a man who knows God's faithfulness and wasn't afraid to proclaim both the joy of salvation and the sternness of judgement. You went out *because* he was calling you to repentance in preparation for God's coming. Yes, you went out to hear the one of whom it was written: "Behold, I send my messenger... who will prepare the way before you." In other words, Jesus says to them, "You saw what God is doing through me and so you went out to meet John, to listen to his message, to be baptised in the Jordan, because you knew that you need to be prepared for God's coming.

And, Brothers and Sisters, we need to hear the same thing. We've seen the goodness of God, we've seen his faithfulness in Jesus. We've know the joy of being forgiven our sins and restored to fellowship with God. We've received his Spirit and have known the beginning of new creation. We've experienced the fellowship of this redeemed community. We should be as certain as John was that in Jesus God's salvation has come, that in Jesus new creation has begun. And we should be as certain as John was of

the need to make straight the way of the Lord, to shout to the world with joy and also with earnestness: Repent, because the kingdom of God is here. But I think we've lost that—or at least a good bit of it. The joy has faded and we've become complacent.

And so Advent is a call to remember the faithfulness of God that we have known, to remember the joy and love and hope we once knew, and to renew our allegiance to King Jesus and to his kingdom...and then to repent in dust and ashes for our sins and failures and betrayals and to commit ourselves as the church, as his temple to truly be the place where heaven and earth meet, the place that confronts the kingdoms of men with the kingdom of God, that confronts the principalities and powers with the victory of the cross, to be the people who know the redemption of sins and who go out into the world to make straight the way of the Lord. Brothers and Sisters, let Advent remind you of the joy of your salvation; let Advent remind you of the kingdom vocation you've been given; let Advent be a time recommitment as you lay aside everything else and once again give your full attention and your full allegiance and your full self to the coming King.

Let's pray: O Lord Jesus, Messiah, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that we being faithful ministers and stewards of your mysteries, might so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*