

Divergence on the Lectionary - Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

First Reading

Baruch 5:1-9

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;

for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.

For God will give you evermore the name,
"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,

and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.

For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;

but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

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.

The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.

For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Or,

Malachi 3:1–4

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. (ESV)

Second Reading

Philippians 1:3–11

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 3:1–6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“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 become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for discussion

First Reading

(Baruch)

The first reading comes from Baruch, a book you won't find in many Bibles, including the one I use for the Divergences, the ESV. This is because it's numbered among the "deutero-canonical" (second canon) books, or the "apocrypha." (hidden) These books were widely used among the Jewish people, but weren't agreed upon as authoritative by all. Some scholars say that the decision was made not to include them as early as 160 BCE (before the Christian Era) while others say that it wasn't really set until the second century CE (the Common Era, what we call A.D.). Whatever the case, many Christians used them in the early centuries, and they became part of our Bible. But the scholars of the Protestant Reformation preferred only to include those books that were officially accepted as "canon" by the Jewish community, so they took them out. Now they're used by some churches (largely catholic) and not by others (largely protestant).

Regardless, Baruch was the "amanuensis" (fancy word for secretary) to Jeremiah. Jeremiah couldn't write, so Baruch wrote down all his prophecies. And, as we have here, he also prophesied during the time of the captivity in Babylon. He and Jeremiah didn't go to Babylon, though. They fled to Egypt with a lot of other Jews at the time.

And here we have a prophecy of restoration that sounds a lot like some of those in the middle chapters of Isaiah. (though Isaiah's date from hundreds of years earlier, in my estimation)

Isaiah 40:3–5

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
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.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (ESV)

This kind of hope is the kind that changes the present, not just the future. Remember that in Hebrew, the future tense doesn't exist, so they use the “perfect” tense. To say something will happen, you say that it has happened. So this hope is a kind of “done deal.” You receive it and wear it as a present reality, even if it hasn't fully manifested yet. It reminds me of a time when I was involved in prison ministry as a volunteer chaplain. (before I was ordained) I knew a young man, David, who was serving the first of two consecutive life sentences, but whose visage was as sunny and bright as any you've ever experienced. He exhibited what it means to be “free in Christ” in a way that few other people have in my entire life. And his radiant presence changed the rooms he walked into, the atmosphere around him.

I wonder if you can remember having such a hope?

Or,

(Malachi)

I cannot read this passage without hearing in my head the recitative and aria from the Messiah, “The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to His temple. E'en the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in...” and “For He is like a refiner's fire!” I sang that innumerable times when I was younger. Coloratura bass aria. What fun.

But now that I come to study it in its own right, I find that the messianic interpretation we've given it as Christians isn't what Malachi had in mind at all. This “messenger of the covenant” was likely intended by him to speak of the coming of a Levitical priest. Messianic, yes, but, and I did not know this, there were thought by some in Malachi's day to be two coming Messiahs. One of the Davidic line, and another, separate one from the tribe of Levi. Of course, we who follow Jesus have taken both those images and melded them into one in Jesus.

Without going into personal detail, my own prayer and meditation have given to me and understanding of the “refiner's fire” that Malachi speaks of. I have come to see this fire as both unquenchable wrath and irresistible love. Brennan Manning taught me a phrase for this, “fierce mercy.” I'm not sure he meant it quite the way I do, but it still works. God's love for you, for me, is so fierce, burns so hot that nothing that stands between God and you, God and me, can withstand it. A refiner's fire.

I believe that when I mistakenly identify myself with things in my life that God's love will burn away, I tend to view that fierce mercy as wrath. When it warms me when I'm cold, or burns away that which harms me (think of radiation treatment killing cancer cells) I see it as more benevolent. But it's all the same thing. To me.

Second Reading

I can never read Philippians without remembering that Paul wrote this from prison while expecting his likely execution. (It didn't happen though, not then.) This is a letter filled with joy. Joy in the face of deadly evil, deadly peril.

But the thing that catches me in this short passage this week is the way that Paul speaks about how God (or does the "he" refer to Jesus? I'm not sure.) will bring to completion the work started in the readers right up to the day of Jesus. The ESV says "at", but you can use a lot of different English prepositions to translate the Greek *achri* but they all pretty much mean "up until." So, when we say "God's not finished with me yet," we have good Biblical authority on that. We won't be finished right up until the day of Jesus Christ.

There is an interesting textual variant in the extant manuscripts of Philippians that I'd like to share with you. First, let me begin by noting that the sentence that reads "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace..." might just as easily be translated "for you are all partakers of *my* grace." Indeed, the KJV translation reads, "ye all are partakers of my grace." This translation would be more likely if you changed the word order around a little, and lo and behold, there are manuscripts where that word order occurs in just that way. (No need to get into specifics.)

Now, the article that I found that pointed this out made the unfortunate leap from this to describing Paul as a "dispenser" of his own "benefactions." I don't think that's what is going on here. Rather, we have an example of what we see elsewhere in the opening thanksgivings of Paul's letters. There is a sense of shared blessing, each partaking of the other's.

2 Corinthians 1:7 Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (ESV)

Romans 1:11–12 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. (ESV)

Philippians 1:7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers of my grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. (ESV)

So there is a real sense in Paul that the comfort, faith, or grace that one person experiences can be the source of blessing for another. In this case, the Philippians partake of the grace that sustains Paul both in his imprisonment and in his preaching. I think there's something real and valuable in the truth that one person's faith or love or joy can sustain another in their lack. "I'll believe for both of us."

Gospel Text

In the reading from Luke for 2 Advent, we discover a very different portrait of John the Baptist than the one we found in Mark. While Luke uses Mark's text as a source, sometimes quoting him exactly, Luke's John does not serve as a foil to Jesus' messiahship, as Mark's did. For Luke, John is the unequivocal eschatological prophet, the forerunner of the Messiah.

There are numerous differences between Luke's depiction of the beginning of John's ministry and Mark's. Of course we are already aware of John because of his birth narrative in chapter one. But it is notable that from 1:80, John has been preparing for this *in the wilderness*. It is only when we read 3:1 that the word of God, the *rhema tou theou*, comes to him. John's call coming in the wilderness also echoes the calls of God to Moses and Elijah in the wilderness. This parallel to Elijah will become more important as Luke's depiction of John goes along.

Luke alters Mark's description of John's ministry by describing him as one who travels about. He goes into "all the region around the Jordan." What is especially important here is that "all the people" *"came out"* to hear him. He did not go into the cities to preach. He drew the people into the wilderness.

For Luke, John is the precursor of a new exodus. A renewing of the people like the one that Moses began and that ended at the Jordan. That the Jordan is the place of John's baptism is another tie to that exodus narrative. But this will not be the arduous journey of Exodus. God has made the mountains low, the valleys have been filled, the rough places made plain.

It is no coincidence that it is said of John he will "prepare the *way* of the Lord." Early Christians had adopted this way of describing themselves as a subset of first century Judaism, "the way."

There is a much more detailed article describing Luke's depiction of John on which I've drawn heavily already. Here's the [LINK](#) to Clint Burnett's piece. It's fairly easy to read (apart from the German quotes, which I can't read easily any more) and well worth the time. I want to draw attention to one more insight before I make some comments of my own.

John's baptism of repentance for sin is a new way of dealing with sin that doesn't involve either the Temple or the priesthood. While Luke is very careful to link the followers of Jesus to their Jewish roots, this point seems significant. As Burnett says, it seems to suggest an inadequacy of the old ways in dealing with sin.

Now for my own take on Burnett and Luke. Burnett contrasts in several places the ways that the Qumran community and Luke's community react to eschatological hope. Both "go out" into the wilderness, but only Qumran stays there. They isolate themselves. Luke's image is one of people who go back to care for the poor, the powerless, the excluded. Qumran will have nothing to do with anyone who believes differently than themselves. Luke's community includes the Samaritan, the Gentile.

We will be tempted in the years to come to isolate ourselves as well. As much of Christianity allies itself with empire, it seems to me that we are once again called into the wilderness for a time of repentance and renewal, but with the purpose of going back into the cities to care for the poor, to confront the Sadducees who have chosen to collaborate with Rome, to preach the Kingdom anew. Luke's image of John is the true prophet, not the proclaimer of a Davidic warrior king we find in Mark. I think he calls to us far more hopefully and meaningfully.