

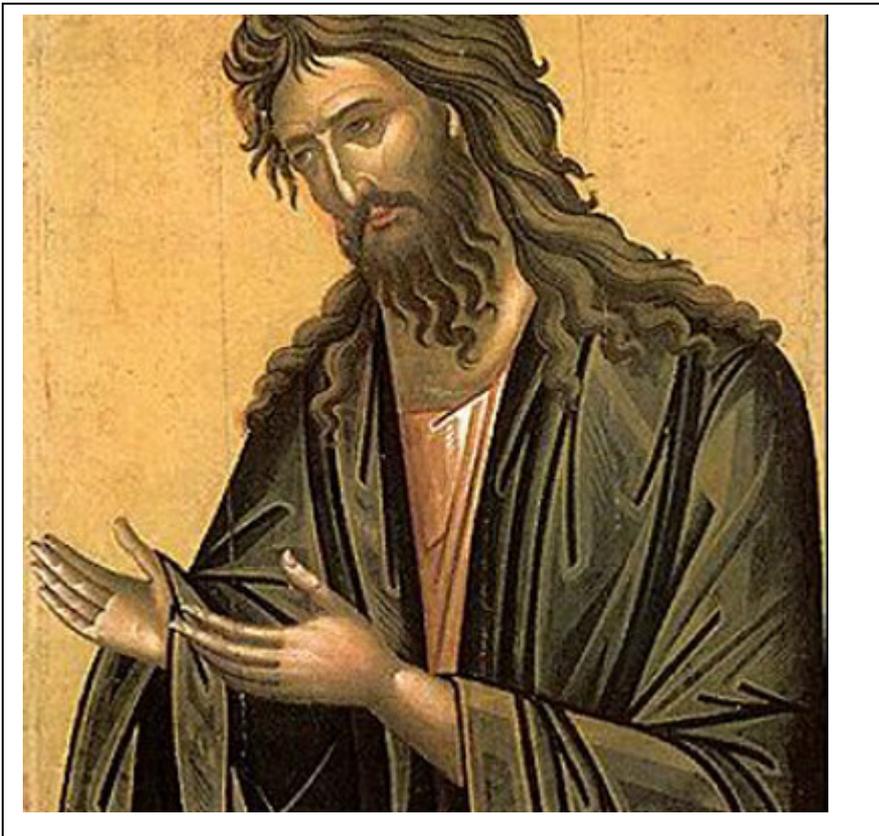
Advent 2 – Prepare the way!

4 December 2016

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Main Passages:

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#), [Matthew 3:1-12](#)



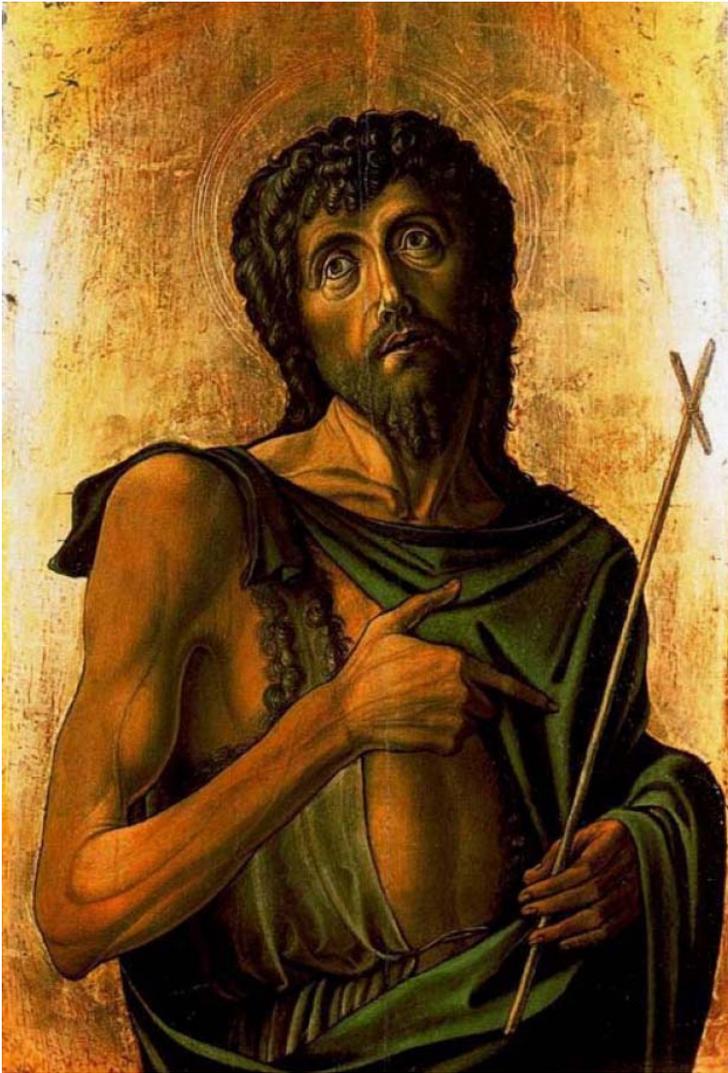
John the Baptist, Icon.

*In that day, the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples;
the nations will rally to him, and his resting-place will be glorious!*
Isaiah 11:10

The word Advent means, “the arrival of an important person or thing.” And who could be a more important person than God Himself?

This whole season we focus on Christ’s first coming, as we prepare for Christmas; we look to His second coming again in glory; and we look to His present coming to our souls even today.

There is an urgency to the season – it is why in the daily reading in the Prayer Book it is suggested we read through Mark’s Gospel in Advent – immediately Jesus did this, and immediately Jesus did that! And we are urged by St Paul’s words, *Now is the time to awake out of sleep!*



St John the Baptist, Avise Vivarini, 1475

And we hear this same urgency in the preaching of St John the Baptist – he is a figure of power and of zeal, an extreme ascetic, a kind of crazed figure as he is often portrayed in art – wearing a scratchy uncomfortable camel hair coat, eating bugs and honey – putting aside all worldly cares, driven into the desert to focus single heartedly on what God was calling him to. Then he's driven by the Spirit to prepare people for God's coming into the world – he prepares them by calling them to repent! to confess their sins and to be baptized!

John's ministry was to proclaim the Law of God and the only thing that ministry could call us to was repentance, the acknowledgement of failure, the acknowledgement that we simply cannot justify ourselves by our actions, even though we are called to love – the Law shows that we are broken and in need of a Saviour.

John's most stinging rebuke, as was Jesus', was kept for the Pharisees and Sadducees – the teachers of the Law and the religious aristocracy – who began to rely on their attempts to fulfill the law, as if it was an end in itself, and on their special status as God's chosen people.

To this John did two things most offensive: he railed on the teachers, calling them a brood of snakes; and calling on them and on all Jews to be baptized, something previously only reserved for converts to Judaism from the Gentiles – they were the unwashed, we are the

washed. In line with every Old Testament prophet, John is reminding the Jews that each one of them needs to be converted through a turning around and preparing for God's coming.

John's message is a stinging rebuke also to every Christian who has become sleepy on the spiritual path! who has become sleepy when it comes to the high call of love! who has become sleepy in the call to look within and repent of the sad state of our hearts and pray for the purifying fire of God's love to burn away the remaining chaff within! Surely that applies to us all. Some commentators (e.g. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook*) have said that the Gospel message in Matthew will not come home unless we see the rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees is a rebuke of the Church – to the ways in which we can become distorted once *in* the Church whether lay or clergy.

John's ministry was to proclaim the Law, not as a means of salvation but as a means of the condemnation of all – that it leads only to us seeing our need for repentance, to seeing that we cannot be saved by it, to recognize our fallenness and to cry out this truth: that we are sinners in need of a Saviour.

But there is such a danger here as preachers or as laity, sharing the gospel with the world, we are on something of a knife edge between falling into preaching moralism (that the Law is all important) or preaching an antinomianism (that the moral Law is not important at all). What do I mean?

- on the one hand, the moral law needs to be proclaimed, to do the "stripping, condemning, accusing work on us so that we might continually flee to the gospel, seek its resources, and walk in its powers. Without the law we would feel little need for the gospel." [Bruner, *ibid*, p. 77] Without the Law we no longer have a need for the Cross, for its atoning work, and we deny God's greatest act of love for us – we lose all sense of the very meaning of mercy – undeserved grace. But it is so easy for us to become moralists, thinking that so long as I am not following outwardly this or that immoral way then I am saved – as if we can somehow become justified by our actions. An extreme example was when I was in my first parish in Northern Quebec, there was a break-off group from our church who claimed that so long as one drank alcohol, one was not a Christian, and presumably, once one gave up alcohol, as they had, one was one of the chosen – they kept themselves separate, aloof, looking down on others – of course there was not a little spiritual pride that they were falling for – they had become Pharisaical.
- On the other hand, we can *so* rely on our status as the children of God – through our baptism and faith, we can *so* focus on our justification by faith – that we can forget the high calling of God to perfection in our actions [e.g. Mt 5:48] and thought [e.g. 2 Cor 10:5]. An extreme example on the other side is when I was ministering in Palermo Sicily, birthplace of the Mafia – where there were so-called Roman Catholics, living during the week a life of murder, intimidation and terror, of extortion and corruption – yet attended the mass on Sunday with the expectation of being forgiven and, when all was done, buried with full honours in the Church – they had become Sadducees. Of course the Roman Catholic Church has spoken out strongly against such a false understanding in recent years and some priests have even paid for their John-the-Baptist-rebukes with their very lives.

We're called to preach and to live in between – not falling for either the paths of moralism or antinomianism. As one commentator has summed it up: "The law is not the gospel. And yet the gospel is not lawless." [Bruner, *ibid*, p. 81] An examination of our hearts should only lead us to cry out for our Saviour and to stay close to him by all the means he has given us – His Word written, faith, prayer, the sacraments – and to have an earnest expectation of the transformation of our lives, real change – outer and inner – by the sanctifying grace of his Spirit. If you are suffering from a besetting sin, by all means, seek spiritual counsel and the means of grace to be transformed, to put that sin to death!



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, Johannes Vermeer, 1655

Both our readings this morning [Isaiah 11:1-10 and St Matthew 3:1-12] point us powerfully to this One to whom we are to draw close to and at whose feet we find rest – Jesus Christ.

Isaiah is given a vision of who Jesus is 8 centuries before His coming – *a descendent of Jesse* – Jesse was the father of David, it is another way of speaking of the Son of David, according to the flesh. And he tells us *the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him*, just as John witnessed the descent of the Spirit like a Dove to rest upon Him. And Jesus knew the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit.

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*

Jesus judges not the outward appearance, but by truly looking into our hearts – do we acknowledge ourselves as needy, as poor? He strikes the earth not with physical violence but with His words – *the rod of his mouth*, revealing sin, disclosing the darkness of our hearts – and *with the breath of his lips* – with His Spirit the old Adam is slain, and the new person in Christ is raised up.

*The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,*

This is a description of the Paradise of God that Jesus will bring about. On the one hand it is personal – within our own souls in his present coming – our passions are being tamed – our appetites, our desires, those wild beasts, are brought together in a kind of unity and common purpose of love. And we have known Christ's coming in our own souls – through our baptism, through coming to a lively faith, to experiencing conversions of our heart again and again. John points to Jesus, who purges us with the purifying fire of love, His Holy Spirit, and to make us ready to be gathered into His barn.

And yet the Paradise God promises is not limited to peace in our souls, to personal salvation, but to our life in the new earth that will come down from heaven at Jesus' Second Coming, the full bringing in of the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

We are in between His first and second coming and yet we do see much of what was promised by God through Isaiah coming about: *In that day, the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to Him.* Think of the way that faith in the God of Israel has been proclaimed to the ends of the earth by the Church – that people around the world look to Jesus lifted high on the Cross, as a banner, and the nations are rallying to Him.

This morning we open ourselves afresh to *the rod of His mouth, the breath of His lips* – we will soon have the opportunity to confess our sins.

We follow this looking within by the bringing up before our minds the Son of Man crucified for us, lifted high as a banner on the Cross, as, in the liturgy, we present once again His death for us, until His coming again in glory.

This morning we can experience the refreshment of our souls – a complete and perfect unburdening of our consciences – *come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.*

This is how we “prepare the way of the Lord,” this is how we “make straight paths for him” and this is the resting-place that Jesus leads us to, it is His entrance into our hearts, and when He is there it is glorious! And as we rest in Him this morning, he wakes us from all sleepiness, renews our strength and sends us out humble, full of love, as voices in the wilderness of this world to prepare His way.

Amen.