

Providence Church (CREC)
 The Third Sunday in Advent
 December 13th, 2009, 41st sermon
 Sermon: Advent: A Triumphant Prophet
 Text: Luke 7:18-28
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Text: The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 19 calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" 21 In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
 who will prepare your way before you."

28 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Prayer: Our God and our Father, we thank you for the prophet John. We ask that we may see your truth this day in this text, so we may leave with our hearts filled with joy. We pray, O Lord, that we may rejoice in this season, not only because of the feasting we will partake of, not only because of the gifts we will give and receive, but because our lives are filled with your peace; a peace You brought when You came to set your people free. We thank you and this is our prayer, O Lord. Amen.

Sermon: People of God, in this Advent Season the Gospels provide many comings of Christ. We have seen His Triumphant Entry and the Triumphant Preparation. John the Forerunner introduces Messiah as the great Redeemer of the world. The Coming of Christ will lead to all flesh seeing the salvation of God.

From the baptism of Christ in chapter three, Jesus has overcome the temptation of the Devil in chapter four, and by so doing, He begins to fulfill the Gospel Promise in Genesis 3:15 that Christ will bruise and crush the head of the serpent. In chapters four, five, and six He begins to do many works and miracles. He gives sight to the blind, He cleanses a leper, He begins to assemble an army of humble men to take up His cause, He speaks words of wisdom, He speaks words of doom, and in chapter seven He heals the centurion's son because of His humility and faith, and in verses 11-17, Jesus raises a man from the dead. It is one thing to restore sight to the blind, but it another thing entirely to bring someone who was dead to life. This report naturally spread "through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country."¹

At this point in our narrative, John is in prison. We know this from chapter three² where John is taken into custody by Herod. You may recall that John's reason for being imprisoned is a reason that is not unknown to prophets throughout Redemptive History. The Prophets, men called by God, spoke directly to the civil authority. In the Gospels we find a clear violation of modern America's claim of separation of Church and State. In the Gospels, John the Baptist knows that adultery is breaking the seventh commandment, and all peoples and spheres must submit to God's laws, including those in the state. But "though imprisonment must have been a grim ordeal, John was allowed to receive visitors, including his own disciples. From these he had learned about the activities of Jesus."³

This prompts John to send his disciples to ask of Jesus if He is the Coming One or if they should look for another. There is an important question that is raised at this point. **Did John not know that Jesus was the Messiah?** Some assume that the fact that John sent the disciples to Jesus

¹ Luke 7:17, ESV.

² Vss. 19-20.

³ Hendriksen, William. New Testament Commentary on Luke. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, pg. 392.

meant that the disciples were in doubt and not John. However, Jesus in verse 22 sends the disciples directly back to John with an answer, indicating that John himself **has at least some level of doubt**. But why would John be in doubt? After all, he prepared the way of the Lord, He baptized Jesus, and He saw the heavens opened, the Spirit descending like a Dove and the Father affirming Jesus as the true One who is to come.

If John has seen all these things, why is he still in doubt? Why does He still need confirmation? I believe that John's doubts concern the eschatological Messianic fulfillment of Christ's present ministry. Let me explain this a bit more. "In the context of these powerful displays, John wonders whether Jesus is in fact the "Coming One" that John had prophesied (3:15-17)."⁴ After all, in Luke three, John introduces Jesus as the Judge of all the earth, the One who will bring fire from heaven, "who (will) sift Israel and cut down the corrupt trees from the forest, and yet here is Jesus healing and raising the dead and casting out demons. John wonders, 'Where's the fire from heaven?'"⁵ You see, in John's eyes his prophecies are not being fulfilled precisely as he expected. **John misses the eschatological nature/progression of Messiah's works.** This is a two-phase ministry. First, proclaim the gospel (3:3,6), and then on the basis of their rejection/disbelief/corruption/taking offense (scandalizw - 7:23), Christ acts as Messianic Judge. John seems ⁶to miss the big picture. He wants the entire Messianic rule to happen at once, but he forgets that there is always an interval for preaching, repentance, and forgiveness.

When the disciples pose the question, Jesus responds in verse 22 in a seven-fold description of His works; a seven-fold description that symbolizes the fulfillment of all prophecies; symbolizes the fulfillment of all things in this anointed One of Israel. **Is this the One to Come?** Yes, He is.

⁴ Peter Leithart, sermon on Leithart.com

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The seven-fold theme was brought by someone in the BH list. Certainly an important number in the Gospels.

He will fulfill all the prophecies of the Forerunner, but He will fulfill them according to the plan of the Father. John, in one sense, misunderstood the fullness of the Messianic work. Certainly Jesus will bring judgment, but Jesus will judge a people only after He has demonstrated His “longsuffering, patience, and mercy toward this hardened generation.”⁷ **And how does Messiah demonstrate His mercy toward this generation?** First, the blind receive their sight. He fulfills the promise of Isaiah 42 that “He will open the eyes that are blind.”⁸ Secondly, He will make the lame to walk. He fulfills the promise of Isaiah 35 that the “lame man shall leap like a deer.”⁹ Third, the lepers are cleansed. He fulfills the prophecy of Ezekiel that He will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean.¹⁰ This is a very clear baptismal imagery when the lepers representing uncleanness both spiritual and physical are cleansed by Messiah’s work. Fourth, the deaf hear. He fulfills the promise of Isaiah that in that day the deaf will hear the true words.¹¹ Fifth, the dead are raised up. **Now you begin to see an intensification of these miracles.** It is one thing to heal, but it is another to raise someone from the grave. In Luke three, Jesus says that He will raise a new generation to serve Him. He will raise them from stones. This is the beginning of that mighty work. But there is more. Sixth, the poor will have good news preached to them. This is a clear theme in the Prophet Isaiah when the Lord is anointed He will preach good news to the poor.¹² But Jesus is also fulfilling the prophecy of Zephaniah when he says “the lame will be saved, the outcast will be gathered, He will change their shame into praise and He will make them renowned and praised in all the land.”¹³ “He is restoring Israel, a new Israel, leading them out of the old Israel. **An Exodus is taking place.** And it is happening by restoring

⁷ Leithart.

⁸ Is. 42:7

⁹ Is. 35:6

¹⁰ Ez. 36:25

¹¹ Is. 29:18

¹² Is. 61:1

¹³ Zephaniah 3:14-20.

the people **physically** so that they can come into the temple to worship the Lord! He is making them whole.”¹⁴

And finally, Jesus says that those who are not offended by Him will be blessed. In other words, blessed are they who are not scandalized by what Jesus says and does. Blessed are they who understand the fullness of the Messianic mission. Jesus, in contrast to the expectation of some, does not begin His work in judgment; He comes in humility and in service to Israel. He does not come in the manner of a revolutionary leader “immediately standing in judgment over her,”¹⁵ but He comes in service, in patience, and in mercy. He comes in peace! “This is the stumbling block to fiery-yet-faithful Jews who are looking for the kingdom to come now in all its splendor.”¹⁶

In verses 24-28, Jesus begins to affirm the prophetic mission of John. “Jesus turns to those who may have heard these doubts of John and casts aside any doubts concerning John. He is the one God had promised would come; the forerunner.”¹⁷

John did precisely what a forerunner does. He pointed Israel to the Lamb of God, to the One who is the good news to the poor. Jesus now proceeds to ask what some consider quasi-satirical questions. Did you go into the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind? No, everyone knew that John was like a sturdy oak, not like a trembling reed.¹⁸ Was John a man dressed in soft garments? Those who wear “soft” garments are the people without backbone who readily

¹⁴ Burke Shade, Sermon notes.

¹⁵ Leithart.

¹⁶ From Dave Hatcher’s outline of Luke 7:

http://www.trinitykirk.org/transcripts/Faith__Compassion__and_Doubts_in_the_Kingdom_of_God_349_2006_02_26.pdf

¹⁷ Hatcher.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, 396.

compromise in order to be rewarded with a high office in the king's palace.¹⁹ None of these things befit the character of John. He is the uncompromising prophet; the greatest of all prophets of the Older Covenant. Jesus says that He is more than a prophet, for John not only prophesied, but was himself the object of prophecy, as Jesus says quoting from Malachi chapter three:

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

He is the greater Elijah who paves the way for Messiah's coming. Indeed, so great is the prophethood status of John that Jesus says that **born of women none is greater than John.** Jesus points the people's attention to the man who is imprisoned by Herod. He is the one whose arrival “upon the scene of history has been prophesied.”²⁰ In fact, the ministry of John prepares for Jesus, just as his death foreshadows the cross. Both Jesus and John are seized and bound (14:3; cf. 26:4; 27:2). “John is the last and greatest of the Old Covenant prophets... and His death points ahead in the story to the death of One (even greater than John).”²¹

Yet though exalting the status of John's prophethood, our Lord Jesus makes this startling claim:

“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”²² **What can this mean?**

How can anyone be greater than John? There are observations to consider before we can answer this question. The first concerns the use of the word “least” in the Scriptures. When we think of “least,” we think of “not as powerful” or “not as strong.” But the Scriptures use this term differently. For instance, in Isaiah 60 when speaking of the future glory of Israel, God describes

¹⁹ See Hendriksen for similar analysis, 396.

²⁰ Hendriksen, 397.

²¹ Leithart.

²² Luke 7:28.

Israel as “The least one (who) shall become a clan and the smallest one a mighty nation.”²³ So to be least in the kingdom means that God will exalt her. It is also important to notice that because they are least does not mean that they will continue as “least.” They are presently “least” because they know little, but as they mature from infancy to adulthood they will become “great.”

Secondly, what does it mean to be “greater than John?” This question assumes a particular view of redemptive history. The kingdom of God is the beginning of a new era in redemptive history.

Messiah introduces the kingdom in His redemptive work at the Cross, Resurrection, and

Ascension. **What does this all mean?** The least in the kingdom of God are those who partake of

the kingdom Christ introduces.²⁴ John the Forerunner and Jesus the Messiah represent two

distinct eras in Redemptive History. John is the greatest prophet of the Old Creation, the Older

Covenant, whereas Christ is the greater prophet of the New Covenant. John concludes the Old

Creation Prophethood and he prepares the way for the New Creation Prophethood in Jesus

Christ. Even though John was great, those who are clothed in Christ, who embraces the maturity

of Christ, are greater than John. Whereas John prepared the way of the Lord, we in the New

Covenant walk in the ways of the mature Man, Jesus Christ. This does not mean that John did

not have Christ as his Lord, indeed he did, but this means that we live under the Ascended

Christ, whereas John did not see the fullness of the Messianic work. We live in the age of

kingdom expansion. We live under the fullness of the Messianic reign, and because of that we

are priests, prophets, and kings. All that the prophets leading up to John prophesied, **we now**

have in Christ. John never lived to see the death, resurrection, and ascension of Messiah, **but we**

live in light of His death, resurrection, and ascension.

How shall we then live?

²³ Vs. 22.

²⁴ Some helpful thoughts from Burke Shade, Tim Gallant, and others in the CREC list.

This entire chapter is filled with rich applications. It begins in verses 1-10 discussing the amazing contrast of the faith of the centurion to the Jewish leaders. In verses 11-17, we find the compassion of our Lord in raising the widow's son. In our passage we get a glimpse into John's doubts. But John does not doubt the Messianic nature of Jesus; he doubts the Messianic mission of Jesus. He is expecting Jesus to bring doom to this corrupt nation. There is a very important lesson for us this morning. At times we want God to bring doom and we forget about His patience and mercy. Paul writes that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. By God's grace, He showed us mercy, and not destruction.

The Scriptures teach us that God saves, even when we and our fathers have committed iniquity. The Scriptures also teach us that God condemns the wicked for their abominable deeds. We must remember that God judgments are always bathed in mercy. His desire is for the salvation of the nations. Indeed it was only when the nations became corrupt beyond repair, it is only when someone worships his sins so much, and only then does God give him over to a reprobate mind.

On this Lord's Day we need to remember that God saves and delivers through His beloved Son. He brings judgment, but before judgment He brings mercy and grace to those who believe in Him and trust Him to be Lord.

Also, we recall the sobering words of Jesus when he says: "Blessed are those who are not offended by him." Are we scandalized by the words of Jesus? Is it offensive to you when He claims to be the only Savior, which means that those who do not believe in Him do not have life? Are you offended when He claims to be ruler of the world? Are you offended that His kingdom is a theocratic kingdom? Is this vision not the vision you want? Blessed are those who are not scandalized by the message and mission of Christ, for you are Christ's, resurrected sons of

Abraham, and heirs according to the Promise, so Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Thanks be to God.

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