



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
In the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 9, 2012
The Second Sunday of Advent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
Luke 7:28-35
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A PROPHET FOR CHRISTMAS

In the gospel we heard read moments ago, we hear that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet ever born of woman. But all of John's greatness could not keep him from suffering a prophet's fate and so we find John sitting in prison. He couldn't pipe a tune any other than the one God gave him to pipe and many wouldn't dance to it. It was while he was sitting in prison that John began to hear rumors about another piper. One rumor that reached his ears originated in Nain. Jesus was in Nain when he met a funeral procession near the gate of the town. Some men carry a bier upon which lies the dead body of a young man; his mother weeps surrounded by her friends and neighbors. Jesus comforts the mother and touches the bier and the dead man sits up and begins to speak; he and his mother are reunited, their little family is made whole again. The people who saw this became afraid, but they also glorify God and say, "this is a great prophet that has risen up in our midst."

For good or ill, the Jews had always thought very highly of their prophets. They honored and revered their names and their writings, those writings being second only to the law in the books of scripture.

But as much as Israel revered them, they also disliked prophets. Their words were too difficult for some people to hear, or were inconvenient to them. Kings complained that they never brought a favorable word to them. God was not blessing what the people wanted blessed, he was not cursing whom the people would have cursed and the prophets, bringers of God's word suffered from at best, a complete lack of popularity, and at worse, imminent death. "Behold let us lie in wait for the righteous man, for he is inconvenient to us." In our own day, there is an account of a monk saying, "It is good that we have readings from the prophets like [Amos], but better to have them read in the morning when [monasteries] have few visitors. Many people, when they learn what is in the bible, become unglued." K. Norris *Cloister Walk*

And in the face of people coming unglued at their words is it any wonder the prophets never seem comfortable with their vocation. They never enjoy what we might call popular success. Many of them were given hard things to say and hard sayings rarely win the hearts of an audience. John the Baptist knew something about this kind of reception. Herod and Herodias came unglued at his words about their illicit marriage. The Pharisees, that brood of vipers, became unglued at John's suggestion that they repent, and his denouncements of them as hypocrites.

As we approach the joy of Christmas and the tenderness of the Nativity, there are some hard words we must contend with now while we still have time. And that is not very popular or convenient. You probably don't want to hear this right now any more than I want to say it. But it must be said and it must be dealt with or Christmas will mean nothing. No more than Easter would mean anything without Good Friday. The Christ child did not come into the world to give us a warm feeling or to buck up our self esteem, but rather to save us from our sins, sins from which we are powerless to save ourselves. The cry of this season is "Repent." It was the Baptist's cry, and if you really listen, it is the cry of the Christ Child.

After his birth, and in accordance with the law, Jesus was presented in the temple. During this event, a prophecy was set forth about him. We ought to be familiar with it; we hear it every time we gather for evensong. "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; to be a light to lighten the gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel."

These words are said by a pious old man named Simeon, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, he takes the infant Jesus in his arms and says as much to the child as to God, "Lord, liberate me. Ransom me from the bondage of sin and I will depart in peace, with the peace promised to all by the message of a host of angels crying, 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace good will toward men.'" The kind of peace that comes to those who see the naked arm of the Lord bringing salvation into the world. And the child that Simeon held, his very name, Jesus means "God saves." And what does he save us from? He saves us from sin.

The song of Simeon is short, but it is heavy-laden with old and new testament allusions; things past and present and things to come. But there is a second part to Simeon's prophecy. Turning to Mary he says, this child will be a sign to be spoken against and will reveal the hearts of many. This child is destined to cause the rise and fall of many. Jesus, that little baby we love so much, is going to be a stumbling block in the midst of his people. In response, people will be divided. Some will come unglued and fall apart. Not being able to do the hard bits; they are unable to receive the glorious bits. While some who by their faith in him will be made whole and rise in glory: having done the hard bits, they receive all the glory and much more.

From Na-in, word spread far and wide about Jesus raising a dead boy off his funeral bier and making a little family whole again. And the word spread until it reached a prophets prison cell. John asks two of his disciples to go find Jesus and ask if he is the messiah, or should they look for someone else. John's people find the Lord and in the very first hour of their visit, Jesus heals some of the townsfolk. He heals their infirmities, plagues, evil spirits and blindness. He puts people back together again and makes them whole. Then Jesus turns back to John's disciples and tells them to go back and tell John what they just saw.

So what did they see: tricks, magic? No, Jesus was making the best case possible for his authentic claim to messiah and savior. He was fulfilling all that the prophets said the messiah would do and be. "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing." Isa 35.4-6 Tell John that I have become a stumbling block and all around me, high places are being brought low and valleys are being raised up. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief corner, a stumbling block over which many are falling and many are rising.