



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 12, 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Isaiah 35
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‘Then shall the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.’

“When all things were in quiet silence and night was in the midst of her swift course, thine almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne.” Words from the Wisdom of Solomon that form the old introit for the First Sunday after Christmas.

On this third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing we begin to shift away from our meditation on the Second Coming of Christ and start remembering his first coming in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. In just twelve days’ time, we will be preparing to celebrate Midnight Mass and, as it were, re-enacting those words of the Wisdom of Solomon as we recall that first silent night and the angels visiting the shepherds.

In these next twelve days, New York will become busier and busier; more frenetic, and the streets around Fifth Avenue ever more crowded. Meanwhile, here in Saint Thomas, more and more people will find a haven of calm; an oasis of prayer; and time for reflection.

“When all things were in quiet silence...”

That silence allows us to reflect on hope. Indeed, our readings at evensong today consist of prophecies of hope. And in the case of Zechariah, his silence was enforced by the angel, giving him nine months to reflect and to ponder God’s gracious will.

Our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah is set just before the narrative describing the invasion of Israel by King Sennacherib of Assyria with a great army. It is a prophecy of hope that describes the wilderness or dessert becoming a rich and fertile land. Moreover, that desert will become a highway – a safe place to travel. Later in Isaiah, that highway will bring all peoples to Jerusalem, the city of God where all shall dwell in safety. Isaiah says, *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”*

This prophecy of Isaiah we find fulfilled in the Gospels and, specifically, in the birth of John the Baptist. If you remember, last week we heard the account of the conception of John the Baptist into the priestly Aaronic family of Zechariah and Anna, and how the angel Gabriel was sent to the Temple at the time of the offering of incense. Zechariah, old in age, could not believe the message of the angel and was struck dumb because of it. At the birth of his son, his priestly colleagues and wider family wanted to give him the name of his

father, but Elizabeth insisted that he be called John. And when they turn to Zechariah for his opinion and Zechariah writes down the name, John, the prophecy of Isaiah we heard today was fulfilled: *“the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy.”* And sing he did, filled with the Holy Spirit, a canticle that has become an integral part of morning prayer for the Church, just as the Song of Mary is found at the heart of Evening Prayer.

Let us reflect on his song, the Benedictus, for a few moments:

**“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.”**

Which is hope and restoration, for Zechariah, in spite of the might of Rome.

**“He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,”**

For the Messiah would come, descended from King David, born in the city of David, Bethlehem.

**“as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”**

And those enemies are not necessarily earthly powers, but the enemy that we call sin; and our mortality for, as St. Paul says of Christ, *“For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* (1 Corinthians 15:25-26)

**“Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,”**

That ancient covenant was sealed in the blood of sacrifice; this prophecy of Zechariah will also be sealed in blood, but in the blood of the New Covenant for the forgiveness of sins.

“the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,”

Jesus said to the crowd, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”

“to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,”

Isaiah prophesied, *“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear!”*

“in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

To be holy is to recognize that we are made in the image of God; that our righteousness flows from the cross of which our baptismal garment is a remind. As St. Paul encourages us, to *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”* (Romans 13:14)

**“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,”**

John the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the forerunner of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, *“This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord,*

make his paths straight.’ (Matthew 3:3)

“to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

And how did John prepare the way of the Lord? By pointing to Jesus, *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”* (John 1:29b-30)

And elsewhere, John remind us of how our Christian life is to be projected to the world: *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”* (John 3:30)

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,”

Isaiah prophesies, *“They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.”* On the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus revealed God’s glory to his disciples.

**“to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”**

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1: 5)

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” (John 14:27a)

Thus, the Song of Zechariah is a fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. Zechariah’s period of silence and stillness allowed him to discover the still, small voice of God.

In the busyness of this part of Advent, we also stop for a moment to listen for that still, small voice of God. In that stillness, we discover the Word made flesh who dwelt among us and, as the old Christmas hymn puts it, wants to be ‘born in us today.’

“When all things were in quiet silence and night was in the midst of her swift course, thine almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne.”

Some words of Bishop Mary, as she reflected this week on St. John the Baptist during a time of retreat:

*“It is **silence** that is the home of any word. Silence gives strength and fruitfulness to the word. Words are born out of silence and can lead deeper into the mystery of the silence from which they come. The Word of God is born out of the eternal silence of God, and it is to this Word out of silence that we seek to be witnesses. But we must know the silence first before we can hear and receive the Word. And we must find that silence deep within us before we give birth to the Word enfleshed in us.”*