

“Both/And”

Each year on the second Sunday of Advent we encounter John the Baptist. This is because John is portrayed as preparing the way for Jesus in each of the gospels. In the synoptic gospels¹—Mark, Matthew and Luke—the writers use as a portent of John’s ministry the passage we heard which is from Isaiah.

"The voice of one crying out 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 be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

When Isaiah was writing in the 6th century BCE he was referring to the return of the people from Babylon where they had been held in exile for almost fifty years. When the Babylonian empire was overthrown by Cyrus the Great of Persia the Israelites were allowed to return home. When Isaiah writes about making paths straight, valleys raised, and hills lowered he is talking about how the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem will be for the exiles. It is a prophecy of return to their homeland.

What I find compelling is how Luke and Baruch use the same scripture yet come at it from different perspectives John is portrayed as an Old Testament prophet dressed in a hair shirt and foraging for food in the wilderness—honey and locust, that is carob from the locust tree.² We hear him preaching about turning back to God and a baptism of repentance. This was to prepare for the coming of God’s messiah--the anointed one. He was to free the people from the oppression of their Roman overlords. He was also to return the people to a true worship of YHWH. Their repentance would make the people ready for this new age God’s kingdom on earth.

In contrast to John’s call to make straight the paths of the Lord as an act of repentance we heard Baruch’s prophesy. As an aside, the book of Baruch is not one that we hear in church very often. It is one of the deuterocanonical books that are contained in the Apocrypha of our Bible. It was probably written in the first or second century BCE. Baruch was contained in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, which was familiar to Jews in Jesus’ time.³ The Book of Baruch is named after the Jeremiah’s scribe, but was certainly not written by him.

Baruch does not call the people to repent but to take off the clothes of sorrow and affliction and dress themselves in the, “beauty of the Glory of God.”

¹ The three Synoptic Gospels describe events from a similar point of view, in contrast to John.

² He did not eat insects; although that has added to the dramatic effect for some preachers.

³ There is much more that we can discuss about the history and organization of the Bible at another time.

Instead of accusing the people and calling them vipers, Baruch tells them they are to put on righteousness and the diadem of everlasting glory.

We might wonder why the distinct contrast between Baruch and John given that they both quote Isaiah. We could look at it in light of aphorism, “You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.” John might have been a honey eater but he was not a honey preacher. He believed his congregation would respond more readily to threats and the darkness of judgement. Baruch seems to be in the camp of those that think people are more persuaded by a prophecy of fulfilment rather than doom.

So which one should we 21st century Christians pay heed to? They are both masterful uses of the prophetic literature to coax and encourage the people of Israel back to God. I think there is reason to listen and respond to both of them. There are certainly days when we are self-satisfied, proud, arrogant, and, at our worst, narcissistic. It is on those days that we need to pay heed to John the Baptist. He calls us out of our complacency and vanity to self-evaluation. He takes our blinders off and exposes us to the reality of the world and the perceptions of those who do not see our self-satisfaction as admirable. John calls us to take stock in the light of God’s calling, and brings us up short.

There are also times when we need to hear Baruch such as when we are down on ourselves. We may have been through a crisis that has left us feeling less than adequate. We may have spent a little too much time focused on our deficiencies and don’t know where to turn. That is the time we need to realize that we are to put on the clothes of righteousness that God has prepared for us, and then learn how to grow into those garments.

As Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, said in his song

“In the tender compassion of our God *
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, *
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”⁴

Baruch and John call us to this way, to God’s way, the way of justice, freedom, and peace for all people this Advent and all the days of our lives.

⁴ Luke 1:78-79, NRSV