

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’⁵ 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;⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”



COMMENTARY:

1: Today’s Gospel reading begins—of necessity—with a lesson in the ancient politics and geography of the Holy Land and its neighbours, verses which are tempting to skip over as tedious and irrelevant details, but which are actually *vital* to Luke’s literary, historical and theological purposes. Most of us are familiar with Herod the Great, who was named “king of Judea” by the Roman Senate around the year 40 B.C. (although he did not succeed in fully conquering Judea for another 3 years). Herod came from a prominent Idumean¹ family, which had only recently (and some say superficially) converted to Judaism, and it seems that Herod himself was not particularly observant of the Jewish faith. Historians suggest that he was widely resented by many of his subjects, because of this perceived racial impurity, but also because of his lavish lifestyle, and because of

¹ Idumea was an region to the south of Judea, heavily influenced by Arab culture, but which had been forcibly converted to Judaism at the time of the Maccabees (mid-second century BC)—at the time of Herod, they were still relative “newcomers” to the Jewish community.

the heavy taxes he exacted, to help finance his extensive building projects, including his complete rebuilding and extension of the Jerusalem Temple and its surrounding complex. He is portrayed by many historians as a cunning and paranoid ruler, who murdered or executed many of his close family members for perceived plots against his reign; the Emperor Augustus was said to have remarked of Herod that he would rather be Herod's *pig* than his *son*, since (out of respect for the kosher sensitivities of his subjects) at least he did not kill pigs! As his death approached, Herod summoned thousands of heads of Jewish families to the hippodrome (stadium) at Jericho, and imprisoned them there, with orders that they were to be slaughtered as soon as news of his death arrived, so that the Jews would have reason to *mourn* rather than *rejoice* on the occasion of his death (this order, fortunately, was not carried out). The historian Josephus, in summarizing Herod, says that "he was a man cruel to all alike; angry with his inferiors and haughty to the righteous" (*Jewish Antiquities*). For more on Herod, I would recommend the "Into His Own" Web site, online at:

<http://virtualreligion.net/iho/herod.html> .

Following Herod's death in 4 BC, no single one of his many sons was judged capable of ruling his entire realm, which was subsequently broken up among three of his heirs: Archelaus, Herod Antipas and Herod Philip. Unlike their father, they bore (in the case of Antipas and Philip) the title of "tetrarch" (ruler of a quarter-kingdom) or "ethnarch" (Archelaus' title, which was a notch higher) rather than "king"; Archelaus ruled over Samaria, Judea and Idumea; Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Peræa; Herod Philip ruled over the areas of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanæa and Auranitis (in the south-west of modern-day Syria)². Archelaus' rule was considered a disaster by the Romans who, in AD 6, deposed him and replaced him with a Roman procurator; this explains why Pilate (and not Archelaus) is spoken of in today's Gospel.

As we can see, this was a fairly chaotic, uncertain and volatile period, with all kinds of intrigues going on at various levels. The greatness and majesty of Herod the Great's reign had largely dissipated, with his remaining descendants serving as rulers of much smaller regions, and subject to the pleasure of Rome. As Patrick J. Ryan says, "So much for what remained of Jewish independence, totally reduced to Roman vassalage." (*The Coming of Our God: Scriptural Reflections for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*, p. 45).

The reference to "Lysanias ruler of Abilene" is somewhat more difficult, since the only ruler by that name mentioned in the ancient history of that area was killed around 36 BC. It is possible that the Lysanias of Luke's Gospel was a younger descendant who bore the same name, and who governed a small tetrarchy known as Abila (Abilene), north of Ituræa. A (fragmentary) inscription has been found as part of a temple near Damascus from the time of Tiberius (AD 14-37) that speaks of a Lysanias who was tetrarch, and is dated to between AD 14 and 29—which would correspond to Luke's reference, since AD 29 is approximately the time when John the Baptist began his ministry. There also seems to be evidence that the territory of Abilene *continued* to be known by the name of the original Lysanias for more than a century after his death.

...All of which is to say that this is one of the *many* areas of Gospel chronology where the evangelists and the remaining historical sources do not always precisely correspond, and about which heated debate continues today. It is possible that Luke is working here, either from memory or from second-hand sources, which may not have been exact.

"the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius": the end of Tiberius' reign was a time of general decline and collapse within imperial circles. The aging emperor (called *tristissimus hominum*, "the gloomiest of men" by one Roman writer), became more and more of a recluse, eventually

² This is the same Philip whose widow, Herodias, was later married to Antipas, a marriage which was so vehemently condemned as immoral by John the Baptist—criticism that would be a key factor in John's execution.

retreating to the island of Capri, and handing over day-to-day running of the Empire to his widely-hated second-in-command Sejanus, who was known for his lust for power and his strongly anti-Jewish views³. By AD 26, Sejanus was virtually in control of the Empire, while Tiberius apparently entertained himself with all forms of luxury and sexual perversity on Capri—at least as recounted by the historian Suetonius. It is, perhaps, fitting that Luke 3:1 is the only direct reference to Tiberius in the whole New Testament.

Both in the Jewish and Roman worlds, this was a time of decline, corruption, decadence and widespread resentment of official leaders. Sadly, things did not improve much with Tiberius' death in AD37, since he was succeeded by Caligula. The stage was set for a dramatic proclamation of renewal, conversion and transformation. People were eager for an alternative.

2: Having just situated John's ministry within the Greco-Roman political sphere, Luke now places him within the religious framework of Palestinian Judaism. In these two verses, Luke shows that John (and, by extension, Jesus) have relevance both to the *spiritual* and the *secular* worlds, to their *universal* (Rome) and *local* (Jerusalem) settings. Four of these names (Pilate, Herod [Antipas], Annas and Caiaphas) will recur toward the end of the Gospel, in Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. These verses highlight Luke's particular concern for history, and for anchoring his Gospel in the real-life events and people of that era.

“John's final benchmark for the advent of the word of God to John the Baptist is ‘the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas’. Father-in-law and son-in-law, these two figures epitomized for the gospel writers the craven subservience of the Jerusalem priesthood to Roman overlordship⁴, the very type of leadership that would drive the devout into the desert. All of these historical reference-points lead up to the announcement that the word of God reached John the Baptist in the desert—the desert of Judea, surely, but also the desert of all Jewish hopes for historical success under God's protection. At a time of such apparent silence on the part of God, ‘the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert’. The noise of Jerusalem deafened its inhabitants to that still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12), one better heard in the ultimate quiet of nature, a desert. That divine word urged John to undertake a mission of prophetic reform...” (Patrick J. Ryan, *The Coming of Our God*, p. 45).

“the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”: Having provided the historical framework for John's ministry in terms of *political* rulers, Luke now turns to the Jewish *religious* leadership of the time—probably to highlight the *religious and ethnic universalism* which characterizes this Gospel. This phrase,

³ The Hellenistic Jew Philo claims that Sejanus was plotting the wholesale destruction of the Jews in the Empire: “Everyone everywhere, even if he was not naturally well disposed toward the Jews, was afraid to engage in destroying any of our institutions, and indeed it was the same under Tiberius though matters in Italy became troublesome *when Sejanus was organizing his onslaughts*. For Tiberius knew the truth; he knew at once after Sejanus' death that the accusations made against the Jewish inhabitants of Rome were false slanders, invented by him because he wished to make away with the nation.”

The Church historian Eusebius likewise comments: “Sejanus, who was then in great favor with Tiberius, had made every effort to destroy the whole nation of the Jews from the foundation...”

⁴ The hereditary high priesthood, which had existed from the time of Solomon, had been usurped by the Maccabees in the mid-second century BC, and had, in effect, become a political “football,” granted by the ruling government to individuals that they believed would collaborate effectively with them in maintaining public order. From that time onward, the high priesthood became a patronage appointment, and it is questionable to what degree the candidate's *religious* qualities entered into the choice. Caiaphas was the longest-serving high priest during the Roman occupation of Israel (18 years!), suggesting that the Roman governors considered him a particularly valuable ally in their administration—someone who was “on their wavelength”. Five of Annas' sons would go on to serve as high priests under the Romans at various times.

however, is difficult to interpret, since the high priesthood was only held by a single individual at a time (although both men held the position at different times, Annas from AD 6-15 and Caiaphas from 18-36). “Luke refers to Annas as high priest at this time (but see John 18:13, 19), possibly because of the continuing influence of Annas, or because the title continued to be used for the ex-high priest” (*New American Bible* notes); “Caiaphas was high priest by Roman law, Annas by popular opinion of the Jews” (Dr. Mal Couch, *A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 228).

“the word of God came to John...”: this expression very clearly evokes God’s calling of the Old Testament prophets (see Jeremiah 1:1), and marks John out as a figure in the prophetic line. At this time, it was generally believed that authentic prophecy had died out several centuries earlier, at the time of Malachi (the last book of the Hebrew Bible), and would only be revived in the immediate lead-up to the Messianic Era. Therefore, the appearance of a figure like John, whose words, style and clothing so clearly linked him to the great social prophets of Israel’s history, would have attracted a great deal of attention and curiosity. Luke makes it clear that this was not simply John’s personal initiative, but a response to a genuine calling from God—true prophecy, in the traditional Biblical sense.

“John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness”: both parts of this phrase deserve attention. Firstly, we are told that John is *the son of Zechariah*, and we are told elsewhere (beginning in Luke 1:5) that Zechariah is one of the priests who serve in the Temple—a hereditary position that would normally have fallen to John as well. However, it is significant that, although John is clearly from a priestly family, we never see him connected in any way to the Jerusalem Temple, as we might have expected. This is one of the details that has led to frequent speculation that John was one of those who rejected the Jerusalem Temple and its rituals, to retreat into the desert, on the shore of the Dead Sea, at Qumran. Scattered references in the Dead Sea Scrolls certainly suggest that the commune there was originally founded by a priest (or priests) who rejected the Temple establishment as hopelessly corrupt, misleading, and unfaithful to God’s Law. Could John have spent at least some time at Qumran? The question is a fascinating one, although there is no way to definitively *prove* or *disprove* the idea. John is spoken of as living and preaching “in the wilderness/desert,” and the sites traditionally associated with his baptismal ministry are not far from Qumran. In addition, key aspects of his message—including the imminence of the end of time and the Messiah’s coming—bear great similarity to certain beliefs of the Qumran sect. Could he have been one of the Temple priests who turned their backs on what they considered to be an invalid form of worship, led by illicit ministers? We will probably never know for sure⁵. If you would like a very readable presentation of this question, from the perspective of a world-class Qumran scholar, I would highly recommend Hartmut Stegemann’s *The Library of Qumran: On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist and Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1998).

The reference to the wilderness can be read on various levels: as the place where several of the ancient prophets (John’s spiritual prototypes) had lived and exercised their ministries, but also reminiscent of Israel’s desert wanderings after the Exodus, which was traditionally looked back upon as a time of particular closeness to God, and a place of intimacy, truth and direct communication with the Almighty: “I will speak coaxingly to her, [says the Lord] and lead her through the wilderness, and speak to her tenderly ... There she shall respond to me as in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt” (Hosea 2:16-17).

⁵ “Tantalizing parallels between Jesus and Qumran, and even more so between John the Baptist and Qumran, are balanced by an equally impressive list of differences.” (Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, p. 50). See also: James H. Charlesworth, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus,” in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 1-74.

Luke has just spoken of Emperor Tiberius, the most powerful man in the world, and has named six other important political and religious figures. The word of God, however, did not come to Emperor Tiberius. Nor did it come, as would seem likely, to Caiaphas, the only priest privileged to enter into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. Instead the word of God came to John, a man whose only distinction is that the word of God has come to him. This happened, not in Rome or Jerusalem or the temple, but in the wilderness. In the Magnificat, Mary said, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (1:52). That is surely the case here. (Rev. Richard Donovan; online at: www.sermonwriter.com)



3: “He went into all the region around the Jordan”: although several sites in Israel and Jordan are pointed out as “the” place where John baptized, it is likely that he was (at least in part) an itinerant preacher, travelling on foot through the areas around the River Jordan. He probably conducted baptisms in several different places—wherever he was able to gather a crowd of people open to listen to his message.

“proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”⁶: the verb “proclaiming” is the Greek verb *kêryssô*, which is in turn derived from the *kêryx* or “herald,” who went ahead of the Emperor and his messengers, drawing the attention of the people and “preparing the way” for the important personage who was following him in short order⁷. This technical term comes to be centrally associated with the ministry and preaching of Jesus, which is often called (by theologians) the *kêrygma*, or “proclamation” of our faith. By using this particular verb, Luke is already beginning to draw parallels (and *con-*

trasts) between the person and authority of Jesus and the Emperor—two very different types of kingship. The Emperor’s message demands no change of heart or behaviour, whereas the message of John (and Jesus) summons people to a radical change: to abandon sin and embrace a very different way of life—the repentance (*metanoia*) that John calls people to.

ΜΕΤΑΝΟΙΑ

⁶ “At the close of this Gospel, Jesus will re-emphasize repentance and forgiveness: ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’ (24:46-47). Peter will make the same emphasis at Pentecost—‘ Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven’ (Acts 2:38). This is at the heart of our message yet today. People still need forgiveness, and God still forgives. ” (sermonwriter.com)

⁷ As several commentators note, the image of a herald in the midst of the wilderness would have struck first-century listeners/readers as peculiar, since heralds usually made their announcements *in the main squares of towns and cities*, where their message would reach the greatest possible audience. It would seem ludicrous (especially for the more cultured city-dwellers for whom Luke is probably writing) to think of a herald proclaiming *anything*—let alone something vitally important—out in the heart of the desert!

The Greek *metanoia* (literally, “to think [differently] after the fact, to change one’s way of thinking and feeling”) is itself probably rooted in the Old Testament Hebrew concept of *teshuvah*, of “turning one’s life around” (from the verb *shuv*, “to turn [around]”). In Jewish practice, one who practices *teshuvah* (sometimes called a *ba’al teshuvah*) becomes, for all intents and purposes, a new person—for this reason, the term is often used of someone who “converts” from a non-observant to a newly observant Jewish life. And Judaism is quite clear: this repentance (often linked to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement) is not simply a matter of spoken words or intentions, but must be *demonstrated* in concrete, sincere actions of repair and renewal, which is why Jews speak of “doing *teshuvah*”.

John’s baptism both *inspired* this *teshuvah* in his listeners and also *celebrated* it; it did not, however, have the inherent power to *purify* people of their sins. This is one of the key points that distinguishes John’s baptism from that which will later be administered by Jesus’ disciples. It also *differentiates* what John does from other Jewish groups (including Qumran) whose rituals are often pointed to as essentially variations on a theme:

What was so different about John’s baptism? ... First, it was probably a once-for-all immersion, as distinct from regular ritual baths ... a once-for-all baptism correlates with John’s understanding of the imminent finality of the coming judgment. Secondly, the fact that John is distinguished as ‘the baptizer’ reminds us that in ritual immersion, individuals immersed themselves. John was distinctive precisely because he immersed others. Worthy of more attention, however, is Mark’s description of ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ ... This would differentiate John’s baptism from the ritual purifications at Qumran even more ... John’s baptism is to be distinguished from Qumran’s ritual washings because those ritual washings were clearly part of a larger complex in which commitment to, and compliance with, the ethos and rulings of the community were fundamental ... In contrast, a baptism performed once, even with amendment of lifestyle, was rather different, both singular and innovative. (James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 357-58)

For John the Baptist, *baptism was an alternative to animal sacrifice*. Both the New Testament and Josephus present baptism in this way, rather than as a rite of initiation into a community. In Mark, John preaches “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Josephus puts it slightly differently, saying of John the Baptist that he baptized not only for the forgiveness of sins, but for purification following sin (*Antiquities* 18.5.2). Baptism, therefore, had a function similar to some of the animal sacrifices described in the Old Testament (Leviticus 4:2, 6:6, etc.). It *may* have also had social significance as a sign of joining the community of John the Baptist; but the texts nowhere suggest this, and in fact seem to imply that many admirers *outside* John’s community came to be baptized (“there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem,” Mark 1:5). (Keith Akers, *The Lost Religion of Jesus: Simple Living and Nonviolence in Early Christianity*, p. 44)

If Advent is a time of preparation for the Lord so that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (vv. 4-6), we find here in verse 3 the way to prepare—bearing fruit worthy of repentance—sharing with those in need—dealing with people honestly—using power justly. (Rev. Richard Donovan; online at: www.sermonwriter.com)

4-5: Largely because of the accounts of John’s preaching in the Gospels, these lines (from Isaiah 40:3-5) are among the most familiar Old Testament texts for Christians. In their original context, they proclaimed God’s “return” to a people who felt rejected and abandoned—a time of joy, renewal and restoration after long years of suffering and oppression. Given the political and religious situation of the early first century, these words would certainly have echoed with similar power in the ears of many devout Jews, who yearned for God to “return” to His people in a dramatic and powerful

way, which is precisely what we believe is about to take place, with the public revelation of Jesus, God's Son.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940's and early 1950's, many scholars have been intrigued by the fact that the Qumran community uses this same text from Isaiah to describe *its* mission and purpose—a striking parallel which again raises the issue of possible links between John and Qumran. The difference, however, lies in their punctuation and interpretation of the text⁸. Although the text is identical in both cases, it can have two somewhat different readings, with different *emphases*:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. (this is the Gospels' interpretation of John, seeing "in the wilderness" as modifying *the voice crying out*)

The voice of one crying out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. (this is Qumran's interpretation, focussing on the wilderness as the proper place *to prepare the Lord's way*; "in the wilderness" is seen as modifying "prepare". To the Qumranites, this text explained their self-imposed exile in the desert)

Because of the importance of the Lord's long-awaited coming, He must not be delayed by long, twisting roads (which are common in the Holy Land, because of the hills, mountains and *wadis* in many areas). If necessary, Isaiah says, tunnels must be cut through the mountains and even the deepest valleys filled in, to make for a smooth path, free of obstacles; nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the Lord's arrival⁹.

The image of straightened roads, filled ravines, leveled mountains, and roads where none existed before reminds us of the public works projects for the benefit of a visiting dignitary. When a king would visit an area, roads were cleared (branches were cut back along the roadside), ruts were filled in, new roads were developed (ravines filled in and hills leveled). The improvements meant to impress the visiting royalty and provide for his (or her) traveling comfort. (from Lectionary Resource for Catholics; online at: <http://www.word-sunday.com/Files/C/2-Advent-c/A-2Advent-c.html>)

Although a resident of the Holy Land could certainly picture the very real topographical obstacles that Isaiah mentioned, it is far more likely that the prophet is referring here to the obstacles in his



⁸ Remembering, of course, that there was no punctuation or quotation marks in the Jewish Bible at this time (they are a much later innovation); both interpretations are possible.

⁹ The famous Protestant preacher and commentator Rev. Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-92) offers another spiritually helpful interpretation of this imagery of clearing roadways: "You will remember that when the children of Israel were settled in Canaan, God ordained that they should set apart certain cities to be called the Cities of Refuge, that to these the man-slayer might flee for security. If he killed another unawares, and had no malice aforethought, he might flee at once to the City of Refuge; and if he could enter its gates before the avenger of blood should overtake him, he would be secure. We are told by the rabbis that once in the year, or oftener, the magistrates of the district were accustomed to survey the high roads which led to these cities. They carefully gathered up all the stones, and took the greatest possible precautions that there should be no stumbling-blocks in the way which might cause the poor fugitive to fall, or might by any means impede him in his hasty course. We hear, moreover, and we believe the tradition to be grounded in fact, that all along the road there were hand-posts with the word 'Refuge' written very legibly upon them, so that when the fugitive came to a crossroad, he might not need to question for a single moment which was the way of escape; but seeing the well-known word 'Refuge,' he kept on his breathless and headlong course until he had entered the suburb of the City of Refuge, and he was then at once completely safe."

society at large, and in the hearts and minds of individuals. No doubt it is a reference to social injustices and crimes, to the inequities which had come to characterize life for many people, despite the many provisions in the Torah designed to prevent this.

“What obstacles must be removed? As individuals, we might have to overcome deep-seated resentment, persistent fault-finding, unwillingness to forgive, dishonesty in our dealings with others, a bullying attitude. As a society we might have to dismantle unfair housing policies, employment disparity, economic injustice, racial and ethnic biases ... The image held out to us is ... [that of] the new Jerusalem, the new city of peace and justice, the reign of God on earth. The journey toward that city may be tedious, and the obstacles we encounter on the way may seem overwhelming, but God leads us just as God led the Israelites. Our faith assures us of this.” (Sister Diane Bergant, online at: americamagazine.org)

Bring low the mountains of our pride,
and fill up the valleys of our weakness.

Break down the wall of hatred that divides the nations,
and make level for all peoples the paths to peace. (www.creighton.edu)

6: “All flesh shall see the salvation of God”: Particularly for Luke (who is presumably a Gentile), this is the radical newness of what Jesus will offer: *all human beings* (this is the meaning of “all flesh”) will now have equal access to God’s salvation. Luke’s Gospel particularly emphasizes the universal significance of Jesus’ salvation, and His all-embracing love and concern, which mirror those of His Father. In Jesus, those on the fringes of society—morally, ethnically, religiously, or for reasons of gender—will find welcome and forgiveness. But it doesn’t simply say “All people will *be saved by God*”; it says “All people will *see* God’s salvation”—will witness with their own eyes the marvelous things that God is doing to gently lead sinners back to Him, to bring healing, reconciliation, peace and mercy in new ways, to people who might have begun to despair of that possibility in their own situations.

This might seem like a dead issue today, because the church has included Gentiles for twenty centuries. However, we live in a highly polarized world in which people are still divided by race, tribal and national origins, religion, education, politics, and wealth. People need to hear that *God calls all people*—in every land—of every race—of every persuasion. *Nobody is excluded*. The call is that we might repent and receive forgiveness of sins. (sermonwriter.com; my italics)

Note ... how beautifully the last clause of the quote from Isaiah coincides with the message of the Christmas angel. “Glad tidings of great joy that shall be to all people” is the virtual equivalent of “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Leonard R. Klein, *The Lectionary Commentary*, Vol. 3, p.309)

It is possible that there is also a subtle word-play intended here by the evangelist, since the Hebrew word for salvation (*y’shûâh*) sounds almost identical to the name of Jesus (*Y’shûa*); therefore, “All people will see God’s *Yeshua* [Jesus]”! Luke is the only evangelist who includes the last portion (vv. 4-5) from Isaiah, and he seems to have slightly amended the text based on the ancient Greek translation (Septuagint), since the Hebrew actually reads, “And all flesh shall see **it [the glory of the Lord] together**”.



“John stands at the threshold of the new age. He is the last of the prophets and, like them, still points forward to the kingdom of heaven and the coming of the Messiah. He still stands on the Old Testament side of the great divide between the two ages. He is ‘the sentinel at the frontier between the æons’ (Bornkamm)” (Father Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary*, p. 10)

“Like Moses, who saw the Promised Land from afar but did not enter, John saw the historical arrival of the kingdom but did not enter (i.e. he never became one of Jesus’ disciples)” (David E. Holwerda, in *The Lectionary Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 67)

Rabbi Meir said, “Great is repentance, because for the sake of one who truly repents, the whole world is pardoned.” (Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Yoma* 86b)

Repentance is not a popular word these days, but I believe that any of us recognize it when it strikes us in the gut. Repentance is coming to our senses, seeing, suddenly, what we've done that we might not have done, or recognizing ... that the problem is not in what we *do* but in what we *become*. (Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*)

A twinge of contrition in a person’s heart is better than all the flogging that such a person can receive. (Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Berakhot* 7)

The world, as we live in it, is like a shop window into which some mischievous person has got overnight, and shifted all the price-labels so that the cheap things have the high-price labels on them, and the really precious things are priced low. We let ourselves be taken in. *Repentance* means getting those price-labels back in the right place. (William Temple)

Preaching about the gravity of sin and the need for repentance is enlightening and life-giving. Our era’s desire to forget the reality—and even the possibility—of sin has not liberated or enhanced human life. It has diminished it. Denial of the gravity of sin leaves people witless and disabled in the face of the world’s evils and their own shortcomings. Denial of sin has left Christians and non-Christians alike unable to understand their predicament, save in terms of the misdoings of others or the randomness of existence. The denial of sin has unleashed despair, confusion and anger.

In a way, learning that you are a sinner can be part of the good news. It means knowing what the problem is, knowing that there is a God whom you have offended, and to whom you can be reconciled. To name sin properly is already to name God, and to open the possibility of forgiveness. John the Baptist is a great ally in the preacher’s effort to proclaim this truth, just before the easy and false peace and goodwill of the secular Yuletide. (Klein, *The Lectionary Commentary*, Vol. 3, p. 310)

Let us pray, in this Advent time, for the coming Saviour to teach us wisdom...

Father in heaven, the day draws near when the glory of your Son

will make radiant the night of the waiting world.

May the lure of greed not impede us from the joy

which moves the hearts of those who seek him.

May the darkness not blind us

to the vision of wisdom

which fills the minds of those who find him.

Amen.

(Alternative Opening Prayer, Second Sunday of Advent)

*There's a voice in the wilderness crying,
a call from the way untrod:
Prepare in the desert a highway,
a highway for our God!
The valleys shall be exalted,
the lofty hills brought low:
make straight all the crooked places
where Emmanuel may go!*

*O Zion, who offers good tidings,
to the height of the mountains dare!
Lift your voice to the cities of Judah:
"Behold your God!" declare.
Like the flowers of the field we perish,
our human works decay,
the power and pomp of nations
shall pass like a dream away.*

*But the word of our God is forever,
our Defender's will is strong:
God stands in the midst of nations,
to render right the wrong.
Then God shall be as a shepherd,
the lambs gathered to God's breast;
and pastures of peace shall greet them,
to give to the weary rest.*

Lyrics © J. Lewis Milligan

