

## Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018

### Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year C: Baruch 5:1–9; Psalm 126; Philippians 1:1–11; Luke 3:1–6*

Scholarship suggests that today’s gospel lesson was the beginning of the story that Luke knew about the adult Jesus Christ. It certainly sounds like a beginning,<sup>1</sup> a biblical, “When in the course of human events,” as it were. In all four gospels the beginning of the ministry of Jesus is linked to John the son of Zechariah, as he is identified as he begins his public ministry in Luke.

Mark and John have no narratives about Jesus’s life before his public ministry. Matthew and Luke did give their gospels narratives that tell us a very little about Jesus’ conception, his birth, and his childhood.<sup>2</sup> Luke also includes the stories of John the Baptist’s annunciation, birth, and the visit of Mary to John’s mother, Elizabeth. And in Luke, the boy Jesus will visit Jerusalem and the temple with Joseph and Mary.

In the face of the many criticisms that can be made of the contradictions and lack of historical accuracy in Matthew and Luke’s first two chapters, New Testament scholar Raymond Brown described these chapters as “profoundly Christian and as dramatically persuasive as the last two chapters [of these gospels], the story of the passion and resurrection.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 227–28.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:1–2:23; Luke 1:5–2:52.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 38.

Today we hear only the very beginning of Luke’s story of John’s public ministry. In Luke, as the story of John continues, there will be more preaching than washing, more words than water, as we will hear next week.<sup>4</sup>

The late Raymond Brown said that one “workable proposal” to think about Luke is to see Luke’s Gospel and his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, as describing three periods of salvation history: the time of Israel, the time of Jesus, and the time of the church.<sup>5</sup>

The time of Israel is connected to the time of Jesus by John the son of Zechariah and by Mary his mother. They belong to the time of Israel, and they belong to the time of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Luke’s Acts of the Apostles begins with Risen Jesus himself being the bridge, as it were. He appears to his apostles and tells them to remain in Jerusalem to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, and he tells them that they will be his “witnesses”—that is *μάρτυς*, martyr—“in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth.”<sup>7</sup>

You and I, from this perspective, belong to the time of the church. Salvation history continues to unfold in our lives and in the lives of those who will come after us. I think the church carries forward the work of the Spirit best when we open ourselves to new understanding in the journey of life about God and about each other. How can you and I see ourselves as part of God’s plan to bring all people to know God, to love God, and to grow in God’s

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:7–18.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *An Introduction*, 227–28.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 1:8.

will for our lives? I remind myself and you of God's promise that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."<sup>8</sup>

Today's gospel lesson would have sounded very political, I think, to Christians who heard these words in the decades the gospels were written. The passage begins by naming the rulers of the Mediterranean world of John and Jesus. By the time Luke wrote, the word "witness" would be associated by believers with torture and death. And it was a time when the church was a growing community in the risen life of the world to come.

The rhetoric of the day was powerful. And in Jesus' time no words were more powerful than those spoken by the Son of God. When a lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Samaritan.<sup>9</sup> It's in Luke that we hear put his message for people this way, "For behold, the kingdom"—dominion—"of God is in the midst of you."<sup>10</sup> It's in Luke that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one sheep who is lost, finds the sheep, and carries the sheep back to the flock on his own shoulders.<sup>11</sup> And it is in Luke that Jesus can promise the wrongdoer on the next cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."<sup>12</sup>

For Luke the evangelist, the purpose of John's preaching is the

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:6, following Isaiah 40:5.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:30–37.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 17:21.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 15:4–6.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 23:43.

same as Luke's own purpose in telling the story of Jesus: to proclaim to all that Jesus is the Son of God.

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

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