

Advent 3 2018
St. Brendan's Anglican Church
Rev. Canon Greg Goebel

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, you gave your Apostles grace truly to believe and to preach your word. Grant that we might love what they believed and preach what they taught through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Good morning. I bring you greetings from the Diocese of the South. I work with the Bishops, I'm the Canon to the Ordinary. There's a q and a after lunch. We'll probably spend the whole time explaining the title Canon to the Ordinary, right? Like, that's kind of how it works. But I work with the Bishops and so I bring their greetings to you. Also my goddaughter Bethany is here. She's a member at the Maryville Vineyard and she sings over there. So ... and you can actually worship here and then you could some Sundays go over there and hear her sing because it's after, it's like 11:30 or something, right?

So maybe some time do that. So welcome Bethany. Glad you're here. I bring you greetings from the other churches in the Diocese. I was just thinking about Redeemer in Dacula, Georgia, not Dracula. Take the r out. It's an actual town. It's Dacula and it is a church plant. It's where you all are renting space, meeting on Sundays, worshipping the Lord together, growing and reaching out into the community. Church plants reach people that wouldn't have been reached if that church hadn't been planted. That's a proven fact of church history. It's a demographic fact in America today. If we plant a church, there will be people that will be reached by that new church plant that wouldn't have been reached by the existing churches. And so anytime you know ... it's hard to plant a church and I've been involved in three Anglican church plants.

It's ... it ain't easy and there's a lot of challenges along the way, but it's a beautiful thing to go back as I was recently allowed to do, by God's grace to a 10 year anniversary of a church plant and to preach and celebrate and enjoy in rejoicing what the Lord has done there. So keep on going. Keep on doing what you're doing until every single man, woman, and child in this area has had a chance to hear the Gospel and to be invited and loved with unconditional love in the name of Christ. We've got work to do so thank you for what you're doing. We really believe in you and we want to be there and support you and Father Doug and all your ministries together. So thank you for for being here this morning. I want to look at the Gospel, our Gospel lesson today and unlike many of the churches around us, it's not yet Christmas and here we are.

And if you're visiting, you walk into an Anglican Church on this third Sunday of Advent and it's supposed to be Rejoice Sunday and then you hear John The Baptist. The very first thing you hear is you brood of vipers. Repent. He comes out of the middle of nowhere in the wilderness just saying these things like brood of vipers, repent and he gathers people at the Jordan River and crowds and crowds and crowds of people are coming out to him. What a moment it must have been in that era and that generation that a prophet could come out of the middle of nowhere wearing rough clothing and eating locusts. Nobody knows exactly what that meant. Did it actually mean locusts, but eating food that no one would normally eat. The wild honey sounds

pretty good. If I was going to eat locusts, I'd probably want to dip it in some wild honey. So there's a little bit of logic here, but this crazy prophet comes out of the middle of nowhere, stands on the banks of the Jordan River and he preaches messages like what you just read here, and he quotes Isaiah the voice of one crying out in the wilderness saying, prepare the way of the Lord, and they were at this moment in Israel.

When people heard that voice and the Holy Spirit prompted something in their hearts and crowds and crowds of people were coming out to the middle of nowhere in the desert. To hear this crazy prophet proclaim this message that he said he heard from God. To quote scriptures from Isaiah from 2,800 years from now and about 800 years before that moment, to quote scriptures that said, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight crooked paths. And then he said he's coming. There's one coming that's greater than I. He's preaching this message to these crowds. And the crowds were reacting and their motivations were different. Some people in the crowds were going into the water and receiving the baptism of repentance, which was a big deal, it represented a conversion experience for the Jewish people. And then some of the crowds were fair seasons scribes and others who were just sort of there with their arms folded and they were, sorry if anybody's sitting in here with your arms, it's comfortable.

It's comfortable. But they were metaphorically had their arms folded and they were looking at John the Baptist and they were, they were just sitting in judgment on him. And you know, that's not really always a bad place to be, don't have time to unpack that completely. But they were, they were studying the scriptures and they'd kind of gotten to this place that you know the Pharisees and the scribes where they had sort of elevated themselves above God and their knowledge of God, but they did start with the scriptures and they were asking some maybe some good questions of John mixed in there with their self-righteousness, and they kinda were stand-offish and watching and maybe some of them we find from scripture were sort of waiting for him to mess up. They were jealous of the crowds of people because the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes were widely respected and feared, but they definitely didn't gather crowds of people around them whenever they taught.

So here was this crazy prophet who came out of some, probably some Jewish sect that lived out in the wilderness and he's preaching the Gospel. And you look at this moment and you say, what was it about John The baptist? What was it about this message that he preached that gathered all these people? And if we asked that we're kind of asking the wrong question and we're looking in the wrong place. All along, if we go back in the pages of the Old Testament from the beginning of creation, when people, when Adam and Eve fell into sin. From the very beginning of creation, we see this voice of this work of God, this tender work of God in the past, preparing the people of God for the future. God appearing to the people in the present moment's manifesting himself to the people after having already prepared for that moment before those people were ever even born or ever even lived.

God was at work in the world preparing the way so that at that moment when he would manifest himself and reveal himself in a way that might have blown their minds otherwise, he had planted some seeds and he'd prepared the way. My 13 year old son, he came to me a couple of years ago and he said, dad, I don't mind doing the chores around the house. I don't mind cleaning my room. I don't mind raking leaves. Probably some truth to that, but he said, I don't mind doing all the

chores, but it's like you keep springing it on me. Have you ever had that feeling? It's like, I wake up on Saturday. I'm going to hang out, play video games, hang out with my friends, and then all of a sudden there's my dad and he's saying, you're going to have to spend two hours raking leaves today.

If you could only just tell me a few days in advance, just give me a warning. I think we've all been there at every stage of our life where something that surprises us or shocks us and we're not ready for it and we don't understand it and oftentimes, and it's human nature, that when something surprises us and something's big, our response is to be afraid or to misunderstand or to see it as a threat. There's nothing in our entire world and actually God transcends our world. God is so big and he transcends even our our world as we know it. If he were to manifest himself to us in his fullness, even though God is love in a world that we live in that's not love, we would die. We would so misunderstand the love of God that we would actually see it as a hand of wrath. In fact, right here on this icon that you have here, you see Christ sitting, holding the Book of Judgment in his left hand, but he has a hand of blessing between you and the Book of Judgment as you face that picture. I hope I haven't misinterpreted this or interpreted it a little differently than you have in the past, Father Doug. He's right, if I did.

God's love is so powerful and so great and so awesome and his holiness is so awesome and powerful and so foreign and strange to us in our fallenness that if he were to just appear himself on the banks of the Jordan River one day out of the blue with no history and no people of Israel and no prophecies and no preparing the way and wilderness experience and Jordan River and promise land and prophecies and Malakai the final prophet pointing the way, we would have so misunderstood him as to see him in an opposite way than he appeared. And even with all of that preparation, as John the Baptist stood here on the banks of the Jordan River, he preached this message and he said, you brood of vipers, repent. And then it says, if you look at verse 16, I'm sorry, verse 18.

This is what it says: with many other exhortation, he preached good news to the people. This was after all of this stuff about repent and you brood of vipers and all this kind of stuff, and it says, and he preached other good stuff to people after that. The Word of God, it just is so foreign to us without the Holy Spirit working for generations and generations leading up to the moment when we hear it that we don't even know good news when we hear it. The burden of our sins is so great. It's so heavy upon us and it pulls us so down, even down into the depths of hell. The burden of our sins and our fallenness and our distorted view of other people and if God is so, so great, but it becomes what we think is a part of who we actually are. And when the holy great physician who loves us comes to us and he says to us, I'm going to remove this veil that's on your eyes.

I'm gonna lift this burden off of you that you've carried. It's become so familiar to us and the vision that we have when we look through these fallen eyes at one another and at ourselves has become so a part of who we are. That when he comes and he says, repent, lift. I want to lift this burden off of you. I want to take these sins away from you. Go into these waters. I'll wash these waters away. We don't hear good news at first. We don't always hear good news. And so John the Baptist is standing there on the banks of the Jordan and he's actually preaching good news, but many of the people aren't really sure. Some are starting to understand that this is actually good

news, that these waters will actually wash away this pride and this sin and this alienation and will begin to reconcile us to God and to one another and that when this Messiah comes, he'll do something that John calls baptize us with the Holy Spirit, and that's a wonderful phrase in modern day America, isn't it?

What does the preacher mean when he says, baptized in the Holy Spirit? And John's picturing a baptism of fire. A baptism where the Holy Spirit will take people through a baptism. It will purge away and burn away all this chaff. In our human fallen world, we've built a system based on our understanding of the world, separated from God and alienated from Him. And we built a world in which we believe God's coming at us to kill us. And it's so opposite of the way God is actually approaching us that Jesus had to invade and come to us from another place, the place of the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And as he sends his messengers, the prophets before him and the Old Testament and John being the greatest of the prophets, preparing the way and softening the heart. God worked in the past to prepare for the present moment so that he can send us into the future.

And that's the pattern that God follows, time and time and time again, even at the very beginning with Adam and Eve as he spoke prophecies and even curses over them. Those curses had prophecies embedded in them that prepared the way of the Lord for the next step of God's revelation and on and on and on and on and on and on. If you've ever had a chance to read the most famous Christian autobiography, Augustine's Confessions, you read through his infancy and his childhood and his wrestling's and ups and his downs and all the witness of his mother, and then you finally ... he becomes converted, and then his final word is this. Yes, I was later at a later time, moved to do well after my heart conceived of your spirit. But in the former time I was moved to do evil forsaking you, but you the one, the good God, never ceased doing good.

God never ceases doing good. He did good in your life before you were even born. He's doing good now as He reveals himself to you and He's preparing you for a future that only God can imagine right now. I remember just hearing the family heritage of my family, my great grandmother on my mother's side in the methodist church. My grandparents on my father's side were actually Native Americans who lived in an Indian land in Kansas and some missionaries, some Baptist missionaries came there and evangelized and they were converted to Christ. And they moved into the city and they raised their family in the city. My dad and my mom had strayed away from their childhood faith and later my dad had a vision when my brother was born with some physical disabilities. I don't know if he's ever had a vision since, I don't remember him saying it.

I know he didn't have a vision before that, but he heard the voice of Jesus tell him that he, that Jesus brought him there to that point, to heal him and not to worry about his son. That's the kind of God that we serve who has been at work in our lives and even though we can't explain why some people are born with disabilities and why some people suffer and we all suffer in some way. We hear this gentle, sweet voice of the Holy Spirit and these moments in our lives saying, I'm healing you and I love you. Even when that voice points out our sins and exposes those areas of our lives like pride and where we've harmed ourselves and others, even when that voice is beginning to open our eyes to see the ways in which we are not like God, it's a voice of love and

healing and grace diagnosing our disease so that He can reach out to heal it. And my parents were converted to Christ and they put me in a Christian school.

I was talking to Father Doug a little bit about this last night and I went to chapel one day in kindergarten and I remember the preacher in the chapel was talking about the Gospel. And I remember thinking in my little mind, well, I don't really need that because my parents are already Christians. And then a still sweet voice came in there and said, it's for you too somehow. I don't know exactly how the words were in my five year old mind. I just know that I had that experience, that first experience of realizing that God loves me. When I got to be a teenager, I went through a kind of a depression and I was into art and I was doing different kinds of art and I thought I was being really radical. I was doing like radical kinds of art, like I called it industrial art.

I was like using copy machines and like copying stuff and using this different kinds of ink that I would smear. So I took this piece of paper and I took some different inks and I was like smearing these inks with lines and a face began to emerge and I said, well this is a face. It was like contemporary art, let's just call it that to be nice. But a face kind of emerged. And I said, yeah, this is the face of a man. And I saw it as a depression. It represented how dark I felt.

And I finished that and I put that up in my room and when people would come to my room, you know, folks would visit. My Dad was a pastor and so, you know, being a pastor he would always have people over. It was really annoying. And then he would always like give them a tour of the house and he'd say, this is my son's room. And they would see this face or some of my friends would come over even. And it really annoyed me because those people would go into there and they'd see this face. They would say, oh, it's the face of Christ.

And I would say, no, it's the face of a man. Like it's just a generic face. And my friends would come over, even my non-believing friends would come over and they'd say, oh, it's the face of Christ. Everyone that saw this picture would say that's the face of Christ. And one day I was laying in my room and I was looking at that face and tears started to roll down my face because I realized that that was the face of Christ. He was with me in this dark period that I had in my life. And even though I didn't know it, and I didn't know how he was revealing himself. He was at work. Not in a way that forced me to see him. But in a way that drew me and called me to him through what I was doing in my life. All that years before when my grandparents were called to Christ and my parents were called back to Christ and all of this time had helped to lead up to this present moment.

All this work in the past by God where he was revealing and manifesting himself to me and preparing me for something that he had for me in the future. He works in the past. He calls us, he manifests himself to us in the present. He prepares us for the future. Just like the writer of the Hebrews said in the very first verse of Hebrews, it says long ago, at many times and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, He's spoken to us by His son whom He appointed as heir of all things and through whom He created the world. And see how that beautiful cycle from creation all the way until this present moment of God revealing himself many times and in many different ways. That's how God is at work today. Today there are John the Baptists out in the world today.

There's people will ... just you and me. We're out there in the world filled with the Holy Spirit, following the voice of the Holy Spirit in today's world because God has done a work in our lives preparing us for this moment. Listening to the words of John the baptist this morning we hear another call from God and He's actually been working to lead us to this moment so that when we hear John the Baptist's words read from the Gospels, our hearts would be just a little bit more open to hear the good news that John was preaching. Our hearts will be a little bit more prepared this Christmas to receive the Christ child. Our hearts will be a little bit more prepared the next time we encounter someone who maybe has never experienced the unconditional love of God in Christ, to be able to have those open eyes and that open heart, to see that person and to see that way before we ever met that person, God was at work in their life too. Have you ever met someone that seems so difficult to interact with and so lacking in the sense of love and grace that it seemed almost as if God hadn't done anything in their life.

That's the human vision that we have that's so limited. God has always been at work in people's lives. Calling and loving and reaching out and preparing the way, no matter where that person is in this present moment, he's manifesting himself to them. Some of us are prophets, some of us are teachers, administrators. Some of us have the gift of hospitality, the gift of faith. We don't necessarily all stand on the banks of the Jordan River like John did. He wasn't the only prophet. He wasn't the only person and contemporary to this period of time. You know a little before this, but when John was, when John's mother was pregnant with him, Mary was receiving the words of the Angel.

Anna and Simeon were in the Temple at this moment, just praying and waiting for the Messiah to come, right? That's what they were doing. They were just in the Temple every single day waiting. So many people were doing so many different things that God had prompted them to do as He prepared the way and you're one of those people today. This is one of those churches today. This is one of those places today where the Holy Spirit is manifesting himself and preparing. And people will walk in these doors or whatever doors the Lord gives you for people to walk in some day. And He will have already been at work in their lives before they walk in those doors in some way and you will be there for them to preach the good news to them. I don't necessarily recommend John's method in that moment. As visitors come to your church, just you brood of vipers, you might as well turn around and go out unless you're serious. I mean there could be a time and day when that's appropriate for that moment. But that is good news when it's appropriate and when it's time to hear. It is good news.

John followed the plan of redemption. He followed the calling that he was given and he pointed always to Jesus. He always kept pointing to Jesus. He kept saying, there's one greater than I, and he was so powerful. I mean, imagine being so powerful that people said, maybe you are the Christ and he pointed to Christ. So this Advent, we pray that the Holy Spirit will straighten out the paths of our hearts, don't we? We pray that he'll once again open us up to receive Christ. We pray that you he'll open our eyes to see Christ once again in the new and fresh way, a fresh vision of His love and grace, that more of that fallen vision that we have will fall away, and these heavy burdens that we carry around of our sins will be lifted as we once again walk through the Christmas season, as once again listen for the Christ child to speak to us from the manger.

So many people around us today are like sheep without a shepherd, just like the people of Israel were in those days. There are many believers in Christ who have never experienced His love and grace. They've never heard that Gospel of love and grace. There's many, many people and you know as many as I do, many, many millions of people in our country who are professing Christians who are not part of a church community for many different reasons. Abuse, neglect, just disinterest, answered questions ... they ask questions that weren't answered. I can't tell you how many times it's broken my heart when someone's come to me as a priest and said, can I ask you this question? Very tentative, and then they ask a perfectly normal question and say, you're the first pastor or priest that's ever sat with me and tried to help me find the answer to that question.

And they tell me, sometimes they tell me stories of pastor after pastor of sort of turning them away or not listening to them and not walking through that with them. There's so many folks in our community and surrounding us who don't know Jesus or they don't know the love of a church community and the body of Christ in the way that we do, deeply in need of His love and His grace. But God, He's at work out there. He's at work through you. He's at work in me. He's at work in our own hearts. He's showing His grace and His love and He's appearing to us as He prepares the way. As we repent, as He opens wide the gates of our hearts. He's preparing the way and He's pointing us towards this great future day. When the Messiah who came the first time will come again to gather all these people together.

He's pointing us and He's giving us assurance and He's comforting us as John points and says, behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and we'll get there in our readings, behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He's speaking that word to your heart today, and to my heart. Look to Christ, look to Him. He worked in your past. He's calling you and manifesting Himself to you in this present moment, and He's preparing you for the future. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.