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Outlines on Synodical Conference Gospels

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

LUKE 1:67-80

The dominant note underlying the propers for the Second Sunday in Advent is revealed in the cry of the Church in the Collect: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that . . . we may be enabled to serve Thee. . . ." The material is Messianic, but always in the highly personal sense of describing the change which we undergo when touched by the living God.

In the period of Advent we are conscious of the rapidly changing cycles of the church year. We sense the vitality and reality of this movement. But we must be conscious that this is more than a mere remembering of historic dates or a recitation of events which once involved Jesus Christ. The Church always lives conscious of her past. The goal, however, is not to take her people to the past, but rather to bring the reality of the past to her people. The genius of the church year is that every year we relive it as if it were a totally new experience. The reality and actuality of Christ is present in our witness and worship as we become sensitive to this.

To an age which seeks novelty — using as its greeting, "What's new?" — Christ appears as the Coming One. He is more than the Crucified One, a dearly remembered but dead friend. Instead He is always the Coming One, always the One who stands before us. Today Christ confronts us in our mad search for change as

THE COMING ONE, APPEARING TO CALL US TO A LIFE OF SERVICE AS HIS DIVINE FORGIVENESS FLOWS INTO OUR LIVES

I

The Coming One Appears to Those in Clutch of Darkness and Death

A. Our condition of darkness and death, v. 79.

Darkness can be seen in our secularistic approach to life, our living as if God did not exist, our callousness, our lack of love.

These symptoms are always seen in Scripture as indications that a man is living without God. The ultimate description is given in the word "death," that toward which all life inexorably moves. The insight of the O. T. holds here, sensing the intimate connection between sin, as alienation from God, and death. It is an "unnatural" disrupting of God's original design for the world.

B. Our condition under the enemies of hell, v. 71.

The difficulties and enemies which we face are not isolated, individual acts. Rather there is a total organized conspiracy directed against every man. The powerful intellect of Satan weaves this campaign directed against us. Hopelessly we see the demonic plan being executed.

II

The Coming One Appears as the Intervention of God

A. He appears as the demonstration of the love and mercy of God, v. 78.

Clash appears between sin of man, the mercy of God; darkness of man, light of God; hopeless capitulation of man, the triumphant intervention of God. Deliverance from night and sin seen as gracious act of God. His mighty arm interposes to release man.

B. He appears as the culmination and fulfillment of prophecy, v. 70.

The Coming One appears as the pivotal point of all Scripture. The entire O. T. has meaning only as it is viewed in His light. He appears as the One long foretold: The Great Prophet of Moses, the Shepherd of Ezekiel, the Holy One of Daniel. In Christ God Himself stands before us, speaking His empowering, living Word.

C. He appears as part of the total design and plan of God, v. 72.

See this in great timetable God set into operation. God's promise of mercy reaches back to beginning. Always a relationship of mercy, "to remember His holy covenant." God's action in the world as well as in the life of the individual has as its end the operation and fulfillment of His plan. Behind the passing moment, God is working out His complex plan.

III

The Coming One Appears to Rescue People to a Life of Service

A. He appears to give knowledge of salvation, v. 77.

This is the aim and work of the Forerunner and of the Coming One Himself. Bringing of gracious gift of God. Interpret "knowledge" in its radical O. T. sense. Not an intellectual knowledge of abstract principles, but the grasping, the apprehension, of the reality behind the words. Thus He appears to give the actual possession of salvation which comes from "knowing" God. Col. 1:9 f. stands as a striking commentary.

B. He appears that people might serve Him in righteousness and holiness, v. 75.

This presents the purpose of God's entering into our world: that people might again live to serve Him in righteousness. This is no easy, jogging religion. Aggressively it is a call for commitment, a dedication, a resolute purpose. Righteousness and holiness are grounded not in the thin soil of ethical striving, but in God Himself, who pours out righteousness to men through the Cross.

C. He will provide guidance and sustenance for this service, v. 79.

He will "guide our feet into the way of peace." Through the Coming One, God has created us a new humanity: great about-face from sin to righteousness, from darkness to light, has taken place. In power God has laid hold of us to overthrow the tyrant. Deep within the battle continues against the remnants of the army of darkness. We do not face it alone. God, who began the process, will complete it. He supplies the resources, guidance, and perspective for the journey. Through His Word the living, victorious Savior nourishes our faith and gives strength to our spirit.

Richmond Heights, Mo.

DAVID S. SCHULLER

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

LUKE 3:3-14

Out of the folds of the Advent story there steps forth the heroic figure of St. John the Baptizer. He was called God's road builder, the one chosen to prepare the hearts of men for the great Epiphany,

the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. John didn't want men to miss the blessings of Messiah's reign, through which they would receive light for darkness (Collect, close); release from captivity (Introit); and the gentle leading of the true Shepherd of Israel (Gradual).

John's message was from God. Many great things can be said of John the Baptizer. He was the greatest man to be born of woman, excepting, of course, Him who, though born of woman, was the Son of God. John was every inch a man, courageous, godly, truly dedicated to God's will, possessed with the vision of the glory of Messiah's kingdom. The best that can be said of him, however, is that "the Word of God came unto John." This was a special revelation, but it was all on the ground of the Old Testament prophecy pertaining to John's ministry (Is. 40:1-6).

What was his message?

TAKE THE ROAD TO GLORY

I

Turn from Your Sins

This is always a part of every message from God. The first step to God is through the dust of penitence. Every worker in the Kingdom must operate with the dynamic of the Law. God demands penitence because that is the only sincere way and therefore the only way He approves. God is too honest to deceive anyone. He tells us the full truth about ourselves. Therefore God's message to John was, first, a message calling for penitence. The blessings of the Messiah come only into broken hearts. The highway on which the Savior travels into human hearts and lives is paved with the tears of penitence. Those tears become diamonds when they are the road upon which the great King enters within.

Only the low can be lifted high. John faced one of the most formidable assignments. He had to break down the self-righteousness and complacency of people, religious people. He addressed people who thought themselves special favorites of God, but who were guilty of the sin that offends God most, the diabolical sin of self-righteousness, stemming from pride. They gloated over their pedigree. John reminds them that it is easier for God to have *stones* as His *children* than people who are in this frame of mind.

This sin is still very much with us. The flesh of every one of us is still of the spirit of the Pharisee. To level down a self-righteous person is a hard task. It can be accomplished only through the power of the Holy Spirit, who uses the sledge hammer of the threat of judgment and damnation. John employed strong language: "Generation of vipers." Most people are lost because of self-righteousness. A person in his self-righteousness will never reach out for the righteousness which avails before God.

All of us are guilty of slow progress in spiritual things. This stems from impenitence. We must discover the pride that still lurks within us, our selfishness, coldness, worries, formalism, insincerity. If we are alarmed enough, the message of God's grace becomes very sweet. Having cut deep furrows into the soil of the human heart through the plow of the Law, John preaches the sweetest Gospel.

II

Turn to the Lord

John wanted all flesh to see the salvation of God (v. 6). Though he lifted up his voice in a literal wilderness, he was sent to lead men out of the wilderness of a life. Life without true repentance and true faith is a wilderness. John's message was a message of grace. "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith the Lord." Is. 40: 1, 2; 6-8, is a prophecy of John's Gospel ministry. Sin leads men into the wilderness of tangled human emotions—fear, despair, without peace, without joy, without contentment, without hope. God sent His Son to make "the desert blossom as a rose." "The Lord shall comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; and He will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody" (Is. 51:3).

To those who have been living in the valley of fear, burdened with their grievous sins (Is. 57:15; 66:2), there was a message of hope in John's words. To those who have learned to hate their pride, to bemoan their selfishness, to despise their carnal ways, he pointed to the open road leading to the glory of God: "Soon you will see the Messenger of the covenant, you will behold His glory, the glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father, you will see God manifest in the flesh."

Many of the people were so impressed with John's Gospel that they began asking questions about a God-pleasing behavior. True conversion leads to a true life. A person who is truly penitent will not only confess his sin, but strive to overcome it and put it off. There is something insincere about a person who claims to be penitent but shows no improvement in his life. Later in his ministry, John said of Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). That's the language of the true Christian. More of God, less of self; more of the Spirit, less of the flesh; more of God's will, less self-will; more of God's wisdom, less of one's own wisdom. Every growing Christian is a penitent Christian; every penitent Christian is a growing Christian.

Los Angeles, Calif.

CARL BERNER

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

JOHN 1:29-34

If a man sees a "flying saucer," his first reaction is to cry: "Look! Do you see what I see?" In the text John the Baptist sees a most amazing sight and cries to you, "Behold. . . !" If you miss seeing a "flying saucer," it matters little. But if you fail to see what John sees, your loss is eternal. Therefore

"BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD!"

I

Appreciate the Wonder of What John Sees Here

Nothing remarkable on the surface — an undistinguished young man from Nazareth. Why call this Jesus "the Lamb of God, etc.?"

A. The idea of a *lamb that takes away sin* was thoroughly familiar to the Jews.

1. Some are offended at the bloodiness of O. T. religion. Yet the grace and wisdom of God lies behind it. The curse of death rests on every sinner since Eden. God can never soften or retract His wrath. In pure grace, however, He gives man a substitute, the animal of sacrifice, to bear his guilt and die his death (Lev. 17:11). Sacrifice is not man bribing God. It is rather the channel of God's grace to man — God telling the sinner: "Your blood ought to flow. Yet I have accepted the innocent animal for you."

2. Most common animal of sacrifice was the lamb. (Daily morning and evening sacrifices, Ex. 29:38 ff. 17,000 in one Pass-over under Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 30:24.)

B. Jesus is "the Lamb of God. . . ."

1. If *the Lamb*, then a Sacrifice, the Innocent for the guilty.

2. If the *Lamb of God*, then a Sacrifice so precious that God alone can offer it. Cf. "the Son of God" (1. 34).

3. He is the price of *the world's sin*. One man, made in God's image, is more precious than a world of animals. Therefore no amount of animals can atone even for one man's sin (Heb. 10:4). Only God, who created all men, can be the actual redemption price of all—in the Person of His Son. (2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:9, 12; 7:14).

II

Behold This Lamb of God for Your Salvation

A "flying saucer," unseen, may as well not exist. You must "see" Christ.

A. God must reveal His Lamb.

1. By our own vision we see only the "historic" Christ. Even in His death nothing suggests sacrifice. He dies cruelly, like a lamb torn by wolves—not offered in religious dignity on the altar.

2. God reveals His secret to John—that the Messiah is the Lamb of Sacrifice; that John, by preaching and Baptism, is to prepare His way (v. 33); and, through the Spirit's descent, that Jesus is He (vv. 32, 33).

3. Jesus has not yet preached one public sermon, nor performed one miracle. Yet John, by faith in God's Word, sees what no man by nature sees in Jesus.

B. Through John, God reveals His Lamb to Israel.

1. Tragedy if Israel fails to "behold" Him. Hence the cry "Repent and be baptized," lest they seek in the Messiah earthly treasures and lose the true riches He offers—forgiveness, peace, victory over death.

2. This is the devoted purpose of John's selfless ministry (vv. 30, 31).

C. Today God cries to you, "Behold. . . ."

1. Behold in Him what John saw, with the vision of repentant faith.

2. Tragedy if you, a baptized, confirmed, churchgoing Christian, fail so to "behold" Him. If you defend and excuse your sin; if you behold only the earth; if you put the Lamb of God into a corner of your mind rather than into the center of your life.

For the sake of a "flying saucer" you would cry to others, "Look, see!" Jesus is a thousand times more wonderful than a "flying saucer." If you catch just a little of John's excitement in Him, you, too, will cry: "Look, see what I see; 'behold the Lamb of God. . . .'"

New Orleans, La.

PAUL G. BRETSCHER

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS

JOHN 1:1-14

In the pleasant glow of Christmas candles we enjoy the presence of family and friends. We give generous gifts and sing the heart-stirring hymns of praise to the newborn King. Perhaps some dear ones are separated from us by many miles at this celebration. Yet we meet them as we journey back to the manger in Bethlehem. Together there we hear the beautiful message of salvation as the angels sing

FROM HEAVEN ABOVE TO EARTH CHRIST COMES

Christ is the only Figure that means anything to us at Christmas. His is the only name that we exalt. We know that, coming from heaven above to earth,

I

Christ Was in Existence Before Christmas

A. Christ was in the beginning (vv. 1, 2). He was the Word before He was man. "Was" indicates a continuous state of being. This also precludes the idea that He is a creation of Christmas. He was before time and before Christmas. Some deny His existence before the Incarnation. John 17:5. The glory which Christ had with the Father before the world was. There are many things about Christmas which had a beginning, e. g., the customs of the trees, lights, gifts. V. 1 indicates both His distinct personality

apart from the Father and His deity. Christ of Christmas is God and is in unity of the Trinity. The Jews were familiar with the expression of the Word as the Son of God.

B. Christ took part in Creation (vv. 3, 10). This Christ, who is God, took part in Creation. Lowly though He is at Bethlehem, yet He is Almighty God.

II

Christ was Needed at Christmas

No angels or prophets of old could do the work that had to be done for the salvation of men though they played their part. Various prophecies. Announcements of Gabriel.

A. Christ was needed at that time. Description of the unbelief of the world. Hardness of heart of the chosen people. (Vv. 5, 10, 11.) Immorality. False lights of gods were lit all about. The true and unwavering Light was needed to light the way (v. 9). Need is shown in the very rejection of Him.

B. Christ is assuredly needed also in our day. War has caused many families to be separated on this day. Food and drink, gifts and gaiety, have also become gods for man and are false lights. We now need the true Christ.

III

Christ Came into the Flesh at Christmas (v. 14)

The Sun of Righteousness came to shine in darkness. The Baptist had come to introduce the world to Christ (vv. 6-8). He was not the light. The miraculous conception of Christ. Luke and Matthew give us those details. Many personal witnesses to the Incarnation. Shepherds, Wise Men. Multitude of people after Incarnation saw Him (v. 14). Dwelt among us. He came not to some, but to all; not for a favored group, but for the world. At the manger was the Light of life. Everywhere else the darkness of death. This Light ought also to shine through us and our observance of Christmas.

IV

Christ Came with Effective Results at Christmas

Christ came and now always gives sonship through faith. Sonship makes us heirs of heaven. Sonship originates in the free grace

of God. "Predestinated to the adoption of sons" (Eph. 1:5; 1 John 3:1,2). There is only one sonship possible, and that is through faith. By accepting Christ as the great Gift of Christmas we go from earth to heaven. Christ is the Author of grace and truth (v. 14). The mere shining of the Light is not enough. We must behold that Light in faith. Christ is Immanuel. "Dwelt with us." In our hearts.

Our treatment of Christ is always the turning point in our own spiritual history. Reject or accept. Those who reject Him receive nothing, nothing but eternal death. Let us celebrate Christ's coming from heaven to earth and make for Him a place in our hearts that, having become His sons, we may hear His call to arise from earth to heaven and take our permanent abode with Him.

Buffalo, N. Y.

JOHN E. MEYER

SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

LUKE 9:57-62

"Errare humanum est" — to err is human. Mistakes in history. Example: Madame Curie said an error in computation prevented the discovery of radium for years. Human imperfection is also a Biblical principle (Eccl. 7:20). Adam and Eve, Noah, David, Samson.

As sinners we have again witnessed the birth of our Savior. God be praised for His grace! Jesus became incarnate to establish a Kingdom made up of sinners (Epistle Lesson: Gal. 4:4-5). Now we desire to follow Him as true disciples. But because we are human, we make mistakes. Our text illustrates

THE SERIOUS MISTAKES PEOPLE MAKE WHEN THEY DESIRE TO FOLLOW JESUS

I

Some People Are too Quick — They Do Not Figure the Cost of Discipleship, vv. 57, 58

- A. A certain scribe makes an enthusiastic application for discipleship. (See Matt. 8:19 ff.)
1. He sincerely expresses a noble intention.

2. But Jesus' answer indicates he was making a mistake. He does not realize what following Jesus means. Illustrations: Peter's vow. Seed on rock soil. Soldiers parading vs. fighting.

B. Jesus corrects this erring man by referring to His Humiliation, v. 58.

1. He does not forbid the man to follow. See v. 59.

2. Neither does He advocate a life of poverty. (Cp. 2 Cor. 8:9. "Son of Man." Stress the Atonement here.)

3. He describes the motive and pattern of discipleship, Matt. 16:24 ff.; Phil. 2:5 ff.

C. Are we making this mistake? True discipleship is the life in Christ for Christ. Knowing the cost, we follow on for Christ's sake, Phil. 3:7 ff.

II

Some People Are Too Slow — They Vacillate Between Conflicting Duties, vv. 59, 60

A. This mistake in discipleship is illustrated by the second man in our text.

1. He desires to perform a sacred duty — to bury his father.

2. His mistake is that he thinks this duty comes first.

B. Jesus corrects his mistake by pointing out his real duty.

1. Jesus does not minimize one's duty to parents.

2. He is teaching the basic principle of Christian discipleship: The Kingdom first and first always! (Matt. 6:33.)

3. He emphasizes the greater duty of proclaiming the Kingdom, Matt. 28:19 f.; Eph. 3:7, 8; Rom. 10:14.

(NOTE: It has always been a moot question what *tous nekrous* means. Though it was not Jesus' intention to discuss Christian burial here, the statement does offer the pastor such opportunity, provided the text is not forced to say too much.)

C. In the world today following Jesus demands complete devotion, Matt. 5:13 f.

1. Not even family duties may overshadow our love for Jesus, Matt. 10:37.

2. Counterfeit duties should not obscure the Cross.

3. All our obligations to the Kingdom are outlined in the Scriptures, John 8:32.

4. Our highest duty is to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to the living. *Diaggelle*, "continue to proclaim abroad." (Is. 40:1 f.; 55:1.)

III

Others Simply Stand Still—They Hesitate Between Love for Jesus and the World, vv. 61, 62

A. The third would-be disciple desires to follow Jesus but wants more time for enjoyment.

1. He is representative of all those who cannot leave the world for Christ.

2. Those "at home" are relatives, friends, and companions in revelry.

B. Jesus quotes a familiar proverb to show that such a one is not fit for the Kingdom. Good plowing requires all attention and energy.

C. How often people today make this mistake!

1. Spare-time disciples are not fit for the Kingdom, Matt. 6:24.

2. Some may even be in danger of losing the Kingdom altogether. (Gospel Lesson: Luke 2:33). Sin is more than a mistake, Rom. 6:23. Illustrations: Mistake in an athletic game vs. sin. Hesitating at street corner.

3. Greatest mistake of all is to neglect the means of grace. By nature we are unfit—grace alone can make us fit, 2 Tim. 3:1 ff.; 1 Cor. 11:30; Eph. 1:17; 3:15; 6:13.

We love to follow Jesus because He commands us to take up our cross, He has suffered all for us, He is always with us, and at the end of the path lies the crown, 2 Tim. 4:6-8. Our theme song for the new year will be, "Jesus, lead Thou on," etc.

Springfield, Illinois

LORMAN M. PETERSON