

*In the name of God who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

It is our practice, not just here at St. John's, but throughout the Anglican Communion, to hear the Spirit speaking to us each Sunday morning through Holy Scripture. We typically hear a reading, or "lesson" from the O.T., the N.T., one of the 4 gospels, and a Psalm from the Psalter, or Book of Psalms. This morning, we stretch our repertoire of scriptures by the inclusion of an apocryphal writing from the Book of Baruch, and also a canticle lifted from the Book of Luke. Now, your Bible at home may or may not include Baruch, since it is one of those several books which the editors of the Bibles couldn't agree should be part of the canon, and is especially left out of many "protestant" Bibles. But it is, I think, a treasure with a faithful message. And today, instead of a Psalm selection from the Psalter, we have read responsively a canticle, as is often done during services of daily Morning Prayer. The words "psalm" and "canticle" both mean "song", one in Hebrew, the other in Latin. Both can be sung, or 'chanted', and can be arranged as responsive readings as we often do.

But, why is it our practice to include so much scripture in our various Episcopal services? Why do we think it is helpful? Why is it a faithful thing to do? And why, as Christians, do we even bother with the stories and prophecies and songs of the O.T., apocryphal or not? One answer might be that the stories from the Hebrew scriptures have such fascinating stories to tell, and with such a variety of literary device. 'Poems and prayers and promises, and things which we believe in, how good it is to love someone, how right it is to care' (to borrow from John Denver). Another reason might just be that all our scriptural record, all of these messages, all these narratives which have been handed down to us from ancient times, reveal what might be called 'the great Promise'. God's great Promise. From beginning to end, the scriptures tell us that God is promising a fulfilling life to all creatures, a life filled-full of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, those very things which we observe in the flickering flames of our advent candles. We nickname them for those realities of the great promise. We mark our advent time by focusing on one each of the four weeks. Last week we lit the candle representing God's promise of Hope, and today the candle of Love.

And what we learn from scripture, from the whole Bible, is that God is passionate and long-suffering about the great Promise. God, we hear, is thoroughly devoted to creating opportunities for us to have lives with are filled-full of these 4 great gifts. And God's promise, God's word, can never be broken. God's back is never turned on these promises to us. We are always living in this time of fulfilling promises. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us through the readings we heard today: Baruch proclaims that God will gather your children and always remember them, that God has ordered that every high, challenging mountain we need to climb and every deep valley of despair we need to traverse will be leveled out, that we may walk safely in the glory of God. Paul reassures the Philippians that God's love will so overflow in their hearts that they will receive the gifts of knowledge and discernment needed to determine just what is best for blameless living. And Luke, having John the Baptizer quote the prophet Isaiah, proclaims that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. The Bible scriptures, both Old and New Testaments are unanimous that God is passionate and compassionate about the promises made and the promises kept. And when darkness threatens to overcome us, when prospects seem dim and sparse, God's passion is not diminished, it is only intensified. When tyrants, for example, like Emperor Tiberius, the governor Pilate, and the villainous Herod brothers about whom Luke tells us, threaten to undo all God has done, God miraculously responds. The Gospels tell us that God's passion becomes so intense that God's love breaks forth into incarnation, into a real and tangible presence among us, that Christ is born into our very midst, to make the great promise in person.

These readings we use in Advent and Christmas, especially in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, share the story of what it looks like when God just can't help himself, and must attend to creation in person. These readings form a sort of bridge between the Old and New Testaments, demonstrating that the promise has not changed, only made more emphatically. The story of Zechariah and his family is a fascinating girder of that

bridge. Zechariah himself is a priest, serving with incense and prayers in the innermost holiness of the temple, when the angel Gabriel comes to him in a vision. He is told how his wife will bear a son despite her barrenness, and that son will have a particular mission. The son should be named 'John'. Now, Zechariah shows some disbelief, and Gabriel causes him to become mute, and he stays that way until the child is, in fact, named. His wife, Elizabeth, is the cousin of Mary, the maiden who will become the mother of Jesus. The family connection is no accident in the story-line, it is a bridge between the Testaments, a witness that the Promise is not changing, only becoming more distinct. Elizabeth does, indeed bear a son, and when it is thought to name him Zechariah Junior, the speechless father frantically asks for a tablet and writes "his name is John!" And promptly regains his ability to speak. And then, having not spoken for some months, Zechariah breaks into song, and sings to his infant son about the great Promise and the role he is to play in its fulfillment: 'You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. 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.' So, his song, his canticle, prophesies how the ancient promise will increase beyond all expectations, and will be revealed as a new miracle.

It is instructive, and fun BTW, to imagine yourself as a Bible character. Can you find yourself in the Zechariah family? Have you ever, let's say, lost all hope like the aging Elizabeth, only to find that God creates a new opportunity for you? Have you ever found yourself speechless, like her husband, until God restores you at just the right moment? Have you ever felt so strongly about your beliefs and opinions that you want to sing out loudly and prophetically? Have you ever found yourself called, like their son John, to an overwhelming and yet compelling ministry? Did it make you seem a bit eccentric like him? Fact is, we can often identify with the characters of scripture, the heroes and the villains, too, and I think that the Bible authors, and the Spirit which inspired them, would certainly applaud. As we are treated to the stories of Advent and Christmas, try putting yourself in the place of all those familiar characters, embracing their strengths and weaknesses, their faithfulness and their quirks, and see if it doesn't bring the old, old story to new life. Is John the Baptizer's calling similar to our own? Are you called to proclaim the promise? Are you, too, called to mark the miracle?

If you listen carefully to the absolution which I, in my priestly privilege, say to you after our weekly confession, you will hear something important about our 'Anglican sensibilities'. I say, 'May Almighty God forgive you your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit KEEP you in eternal life.' It is the understanding of this church that we are already in eternal life, and we pray that God will keep us there. Eternal life is not a reward to be earned, but a gift, a state of mind, a way of living each day, a way to understand the significance of our lives and our possibilities. Such is, too, the experience of Advent and Christmas. We are reminded of the great promise, of God's passion, and the fulfilling of prophecy. But it is not a reward to be earned. It is a way of life, a state of mind. We should know, after having celebrated Christmas so many times before, that we are living in the midst of the promise, that our prayer should be to be KEPT in the life of promise. It is our prayer to be reminded of the passionate and compassionate promises of God, and that our lives will continue to be filled-full to the brim with Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace despite all challenge of looming mountains and bottomless ravines. May God bless us every one. Amen.