

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER**  
**The First Sunday in Lent<sup>1</sup>**

**The Reverend Warren E. Shaw<sup>2</sup>**

**Lessons:<sup>3</sup>**

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the eighteenth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.<sup>4</sup>

“And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre [MAM-rih]<sup>5</sup>: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, My LORD, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said. And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.

“And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I

laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.

“And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD.

“And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, which am but dust and ashes: Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for forty's sake. And he said unto him, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. And he said, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there.

And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.”

*Or,*

Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.<sup>6</sup>

“My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of trouble. Cleave unto him, and depart not away, that thou mayest be increased at thy last end. Whatsoever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art changed to a low estate. For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity. Believe in him, and he will help thee; order thy way aright, and trust in him. Ye that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; and go not aside, lest ye fall. Ye that fear the Lord, believe him; and your reward shall not fail. Ye that fear the Lord, hope for good, and for everlasting joy and mercy. Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded? or did any abide in his fear, and was forsaken? or whom did he ever despise, that called upon him? For the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, long-suffering, and very pitiful, and forgiveth sins, and saveth in time of affliction. Woe be to fearful hearts, and faint hands, and the sinner that goeth two ways! Woe unto him that is fainthearted! for he believeth not; therefore shall he not be defended. Woe unto you that have lost patience! and what will ye do when the Lord shall visit you? They that fear the Lord will not disobey his word; and they that love him will keep his ways. They that fear the Lord will seek that which is well-pleasing unto him; and they that love him shall be filled with the law. They that fear the Lord will prepare their hearts, and humble their souls in his sight. Saying, we will fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men: for as his majesty is, so is his mercy.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.<sup>7</sup>

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias<sup>8</sup> [ih-ZAY-uhs],<sup>9</sup> saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

---

<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Second Sunday in Advent, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year A.

<sup>2</sup> Retired Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Chester, PA.

<sup>3</sup> *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 34 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (CIPBC 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:1-end (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 54 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesiasticus* 1:1-13 (KJV).

<sup>7</sup> St. Matthew 3:1-end (KJV).

<sup>8</sup> *I.e.*, Isaiah.

<sup>9</sup> W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 32 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> St. Matthew 3:11 (RSV).

ior? I'm OK; you're OK. Life is good. Let's just be happy."

But John the Baptist calls us to turn away from the crowds for a while. Prepare yourself for the coming of the Savior by removing yourself from the busy environment of the secular world. Go off by yourself somewhere. Turn your attention inward and face your loneliness. Turn off the music and listen to the silence. Turn away from your possessions and look at your sins. Turn away from all the lights and peer into the darkness of your soul.

If you don't like what you see, then John's message is for you. The One Who is coming will remove the sickness of sin from your life. He will give you a whole new outlook, a whole new center, a whole new reason for living, a whole new strength, and a whole new set of relationships.

### **Conclusion:**

But you are not ready for that until you have been to see John. You have to repent before you can be transformed. You have to turn away from your old ways and our old values and your old habits and your old ways of looking at things. You can't be reconstructed until you have been de-constructed. That is what this lonely voice in the wilderness is calling you to do. "Repent," says John, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Before you can get to Christmas you need to go through Advent. Before you get to Jesus you have to deal with John. So don't just go to the mall to see Santa Claus during the run-up to Christmas; go to the wilderness to see John the Baptist. And listen to what he says:

"I baptize you with water for repentance but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

--oo0oo--

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."<sup>10</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✕ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Homily:**

The text comes from this morning's Second Lesson. Referring to Jesus, John says: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John the Baptist represents the negative part of the process of salvation. He calls people to repentance, which means a turning away from old habits, old attitudes, old ways of living. He invites people to bathe in the river Jordan as a sacramental way of washing off the accumulated debris of their former lives.

I have never bathed in the Jordan river, but I do know how good it feels at the end of a really bad day to take a shower. Maybe I've made a lot of mistakes that day. Maybe I've been to a place I did not want to be. Maybe I had to deal with some people I do not like. Maybe I've been stuck in traffic, or locked my keys in the car, or maybe the washing machine and the refrigerator both broke down on the same day.

We've all had days like that. When I want to put all that behind me and forget about it, I throw my clothes into the laundry bin, step into the shower, and just wash it all away.

Something like that is what John the Baptist invited people to do. Out with the old; in with the new. That, for example, is one of the themes of Advent.

But John realized that repentance is only part of what is needed. There is a positive side to the process of salvation, and John was not able to provide it. His baptism was preparatory, not complete. So he said, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Fire is a familiar symbol of the Holy Spirit. We see that in the Pentecost story in Acts. A goldsmith uses fire to burn off the impurities from the gold with which he is working. In the same way, God the Holy Spirit separates what is true and good from what is false and wrong in each of us. Fire also makes things soft and malleable. Blacksmiths use fire to mold and shape the iron with which they work. So God the Holy Spirit molds us and shapes us into the image of God the Son.

Christian baptism incorporates us into the body of Christ on Earth. Within that body, which we call the Church, we receive the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, which is the very breath of God, we are nourished with the body and blood of Christ Himself. We are instructed by the written Word of God, and shaped by prayer and discipline into the very image of the Son of God. That shaping and forming and purifying is what it means to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. That is the positive part of the process of salvation.

The ancient baptismal ritual of the Church, which was designed primarily for adults, reflected the two-fold emphasis of salvation. The candidate discarded his clothing and stepped waist deep into the baptismal pool. He faced the west, where the day ends, and said, "I renounce you, Satan, and all your works. I renounce the temptations of this wicked world and all its shallow pleasures."

Then the candidate submerged himself completely in the water. St. Paul refers to this part of the baptismal ritual as dying to sin. It was almost like a suicide. It was like someone standing on a bridge, saying, "Good-bye, cruel world!", and plunging into the

water. This is the kind of baptism John offered -- a baptism of repentance, a turning away.

But in the ancient ritual of the Church, the candidate would then stand up in the pool, turn to the east, where the new day begins, and recite what we now call the Apostles' Creed. Then he would emerge from the water, be clothed with a white robe, be marked with the sign of the cross on his forehead, and take his place in the company of the faithful.

That part of baptism, St. Paul refers to as living to God, and he explains it with the analogy of death and resurrection. St. John explains it with the analogy of being born again. That is the positive aspect of salvation, which the Baptist realized he could not deliver. So he says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I ...; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

It is significant, I think, that John did his work in the wilderness, while Jesus did His work in the city. You see, God forms and shapes us in our interaction with many other people, but He prepares us to be formed and shaped by separating us from the noise and the turmoil and the distractions of the world. He calls us in the early stage of the process to a place where we can focus on the silence and the aloneness and the emptiness of our souls. That is what I call you to this Lenten season.

The other time of the year when we think of these themes is during our other penitential season, that of Advent. What is going on all around us at that time of year is denial. The denial of sin, the denial of loneliness, the denial of sadness, the denial of death, the denial of inequality and injustice. Then there is a false sense of camaraderie in the air, a forced atmosphere of celebration with nothing really identified as a cause to celebrate.

Then there are lots of lights. Then there are lots of gifts. Then there are crowds of people. Then there is lots of happy music. Then it is easy in that atmosphere to think, "Who needs a sav-