

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent, Year B, 11.xii.2004, 10:00 a.m.
Holy Eucharist – LBW Setting I
Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Psalm 126; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania

Veni, Jesu Domine!*

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the LORD’, as the Prophet
Isaiah said.” — John 1:23

When John the Evangelist has John the Baptist cite the Prophet Isaiah in today’s Gospel, it is actually the section of Isaiah the Church read *last* Sunday to which John’s Gospel refers. In Isaiah 40, there is reference to a voice proclaiming God’s message in the wilderness—seemingly with no one to hear it. That voice proclaims that the wild void of the desert is to be transformed into a highway of liberation from captivity, the path home from Babylon to Mount Zion. This voice is the living Word of God. In John’s Gospel, that Word of God has a life and a name and a face, Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God that was eternally with

God, that was and is God, the Word now born into our time and our flesh. The voice of the one crying in the wilderness proclaims that Word and that Word alone.

When those who have come to interrogate John the Baptist ask him *who* he is, *what* he is and *why* he is baptizing the multitudes as they come to him, they completely ignore John's answer, "I am the *voice* of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD.'" Though John lives in the wilderness and dresses the part, *he* is not the One who cries out the LORD's Word of redemption in the barren void of this world. He is not that Word, and John is not even the One Who speaks it. John is only the *voice* of that Word. God's Word neither begins nor ends with John, because it is *God's* Word, but *John's* whole purpose for being begins and ends in the God Who speaks freedom to those held captive by their sins, the God Who is born into this world through a holy and immaculate Virgin, but a daughter of Eve all the same, and He is the Living God Who dies

His way out of this world so that He might be, as Matthew's Gospel proclaims in the name to be given the miraculous Child—'Immanu-el,' 'God-with-Us.'

Together with the Blessed Mother of Our Lord, John the Baptist serves Christianity as the truest type and example of the Church in her purest form, not claiming to have spoken the Word that brought being out of nothingness, not ever claiming to have authored the Incarnate Word of God she bears in Sacrament and in service, in teaching and preaching and in compassionate love. The true Church of Jesus Christ is content to be what she truly is, throughout the world and in every place, in every congregation, only, *only* the voice of God's love come down from heaven to this black vale of tears on that first Christmas, not at the very beginning of our history as sinners, as rebels against God, but in the very middle of it, now over two thousand years ago.

John's interrogators are like journalists who must meet a deadline to file their story. They see no story in an interview with the *voice* of God. What, after all, is a voice? Is it not just sound, the sound of mere words, words that may or may not make sense, words that may or may not lead us to God, place us in the presence of God? That is not what their Jerusalem masters wanted to know. In time, as the Gospel story unfolds, it is *they* who will be questioned by the One Who speaks and Who *is God's Word . . . as we* all will be.

Do we, like many, think that God's Word in Jesus Christ becomes real only when it is validated by an establishment representing material power, by the retail sales industry, for example? Do we believe that the Gospel must be associated with 'real' power in the form of capital, power in the form of jobs, power in the form of the ability to empty thousands of downtown shopping areas in cities, towns and villages across this land and to transform these from marketplaces and meeting

places to antique shops and tattoo and body-piercing salons. Oh, *that's* power, isn't it? That is the power of K-Mart, or at least it used to be before the advent of Wal-Mart. If we are to draw some conclusions from today's Gospel about the current brouhaha over putting the word, 'Christmas,' back into retail sales that is apparently the power attributed to the *Target* chain of warehouse department stores. The proclamation of the Church is not enough for these self-appointed guardians of what they call the 'American family' and an 'American Christian culture.'

But look at it from their point of view. The Christian Church on the American scene is, after all, a *mere* voice, a voice to which only an estimated 48% of all Americans listen by worshipping and belonging to a specific congregation. Treating religion like any other consumer item, thousands upon thousands seek to have what they call their 'spiritual needs' met by tuning in to one or more of the self-proclaimed 'Christian' broadcasting

networks. All you have to do is tune in. Life together in community is not necessary. Just tune in! Learning to put up with and love people we would otherwise not meet except in a congregation is not necessary. Just tune in! Being part of the mission of Christ in this world, joining together with Christians around the world to help the helpless, doing the corporal works of Christian mercy, and joining together to establish the God's voice in the spiritual wilderness of distant lands is not necessary for them. Just tune in! Joining in that quiet and intimate inward spiritual pilgrimage the Church calls 'Advent' in corporate worship as a congregation and in the circle of our family apparently does not occur to these consumer Christians. And it falls, appropriately, to the retail merchants to provide the right Christmas atmosphere we the consumers demand! I suppose that is how their reasoning goes. The logic of it still escapes me.

Regardless of what our consumer culture teaches us about what we ought to want and to buy, Christ is not on sale at Target. The Church of Jesus Christ today is still that voice which John embodied, the wrapping on the very first and the only really important Christmas gift. Hers is a voice heard, as seldom before in Western Civilization, in a banal and arid void that no longer understands anything of the human *spirit*, that faculty through which alone the voice of God can be recognized and heard. But this, our world and our time, is *her* wilderness, too. The Church's voice will not be silenced, and she needs no retail sales chain to amplify it.

In the old *Service Book and Hymnal*, there stand two beautiful poems of the English Victorian era opposite each other at Hymn Nos. 36 and 37. Sadly, they were included in neither the *Lutheran Book of Worship* nor *With One Voice* nor in the *Renewing Worship* draft of our proposed new agenda and hymnal. The poet who authored both is Christina Rossetti. The

music of the first is by the composer, Gustav Holst, and that of the hymn facing it, which I will now quote, comes from the Irish folk tradition. It consists of three short verses which I hope we will all be able to keep somehow in mind during these last days of preparation for Christmas as we try not only to finish our Christmas shopping, to finish, or at least to *begin* writing our Christmas cards and letters and as we may try to wind up some projects at work so as to create some temporal and spiritual space for ourselves:

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.*

*Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.*

✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. ✠ Amen.



* = 'Come, O Lord Jesus!

** = 'To God Alone Be Glory!; the W[ord of the] L[ord] E[ndures] F[orever]