

Advent 4 (2025)

It was late summer 1741. A German-born composer had sequestered himself in his house in London for 24 days. During that time, he composed the most popular and frequently performed choral work of all time.

I am, of course, speaking of Handel's Messiah.

Upon completing the grand finale to his 259-page score, the now-famous Hallelujah chorus, Handel is said to have emerged from his room and told his servants:

“I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels.” ///

The opening of this choral work is just as moving as its closing. It begins with words from Isaiah 40, today's Old Testament reading:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”

And then, a few lines down:

“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.”

In its historical context, these words were directed to God’s people in exile in Babylon.

The prophet sees their exile ending. They will soon be returning to their own land. God Himself is going to make a highway for them to pass over on. Good news!

This actually happened around 539 B.C. when a Persian king by the name of Cyrus issued a decree making this return possible.

The prophet's words – or rather God's words – came true. And what rejoicing there must have been at that moment for God's people. Their God reigned! ///

Allow me to pause here and turn from a history lesson to do a little 'preaching'. The people's waywardness had caused them to go into exile, but their waywardness was no match for God's faithfulness.

The same is true for us today. When we turn our eyes away from God, He does not turn His away from us.

Have you ever seen a dog do something he knows he is not supposed to do, perhaps get on a sofa? Often, he will not look in the direction of his owner.

If he does not see his owner, he assumes – erroneously of course – his owner does not see

him. Little children sometime play the same game.

But people of all ages play it. We turn our eyes away from God. We go our own way, follow our own path, seek our own fortune . . . assuming He does not see.

The General Confession in the Prayer Book uses another metaphor for human waywardness: **“We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.”**

The good news is that when we stray God does not wipe His hands of us or toss us into the dustbin . . . just as He did not do with the erring Israelites of long ago.

No, through the wooing of the Holy Spirit, through the circumstances of life, He works for our return, our restoration, our good.

He remains faithful, even when we are faithless.

That's good news. If you perchance have strayed into some far country . . . if you find yourself in 'exile' this morning, away from home and away from God . . . allow God to find and embrace you. What better time than at Christmas time to come home?///

Let's turn now to this morning's Gospel reading. Here we find John the Baptist proclaiming the same message of hope and deliverance that the Old Testament prophet delivered.

God is coming to save His people. He has not abandoned them. Their *exile* is about over.

At this point, you might be thinking:

“Didn't you just say that the exile of the Jews ended when they returned to their own

land following a decree from the Persian ruler Cyrus?”

Yes, I did, and that is accurate as far as it goes, but there is more than one kind of ‘exile’. There is geographical exile and there is spiritual exile. I am thinking now of the latter.

Once back in their own land, God’s people found themselves not really free. All the blessings and promises foreseen by Isaiah and the other prophets did not immediately happen.

Sin and death and pagan oppression remained a part of their common experience.

More than that, Yahweh, who had dwelt among them in the form of cloud and smoke in the Solomon’s Temple had not so manifested Himself in the Temple rebuilt after their return.

So they waited . . . waited for a still greater rescue and return from exile, and indeed for the return of Yahweh to Zion.

Many believed this rescue would come through a king who would arise out David's royal line – the “Messiah.”

John the Baptist's message was a thrilling one. It said: the time is now. God is once again on the move. The Messiah is here. More than that it was a message for the whole world.

In the words of Isaiah 40, **“All flesh shall see it together.”**

God is doing a new thing, but there must be a response on the part of His covenant people.

John's message was one of hope – yes -- but also one of judgment. The people must prepare, get ready, repent . . . or else they will miss out on the Kingdom party.

How might John's message intersect with where we are in salvation history?

In this way, I want to suggest.

The Lord has come and He comes.
Therefore, we must prepare, get ready and turn back to Him. That's the message of Advent.

But there is a conundrum here.

We Christians say sin, death and indeed all the powers of darkness were defeated on the cross. Yet, as we look out at our world in this year of grace and sorrow 2025, we see what the New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow saw in 1863 when he looked out at his world: **“. . . hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men!"**

The state of affairs Longfellow saw has been very evident in recent days. I am thinking of the Brown University shootings on Dec. 13 in

which two students died, one a lovely young girl from Birmingham, Ala., who was a member of the Church of the Advent.

After that, a physics professor at MIT, was shot and killed, presumably by the same deranged hater.

Hate remains strong and mocks the angels' song of "Peace on earth, goodwill to men."

What is the answer?

Longfellow comes to our rescue in the last verse of his poem:

"God is not dead,
nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

But, you may be saying: That's all well and good, but why the delay? Why doesn't God blow evil out of the water and get on with it?

I must say I don't know the full answer to this question. I don't suppose anyone does, but it seems to be because God prefers the path of pursuing love to annihilation.

He will come and put all wrongs to rights, but in meantime, He continues to send out lifeboats to rescue those who are perishing. In 2 Peter 3:9, we find these words:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

What is our part in this rescue operation? ///
Might it not be the same as John the Baptist's?

When people came and asked him, Are you the Christ (God's Anointed – the Messiah)? His answer was no.

When they asked him if was 'Elijah', that prophet of Jewish expectation that would come in advance of the messiah, again he said no.

His answer to this second question was too modest. Jesus would go on to say that John was indeed the one who fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's coming . . . but that's a topic for another day.

But who did John the Baptist say he was? ///
"I am a voice." ////

Isn't that what Isaiah and the other prophets were in their day?

Might not that be our calling as well?

A voice that proclaims hope in a troubled world.

A voice that says: “Yes, hate is strong, but Someone stronger has come. On the cross, He has taken hate upon Himself and overcome it. Look to Him and find forgiveness for past mistakes, purpose in the present and hope for the future.”

How can we make a difference in this dark world? ///

First, by turning from our own darkness and believing the Gospel, and then by joining John the Baptist in being a voice.

**Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.**

There is no greater calling than being a voice that brings glad tidings.