



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

4th Sunday in Advent
December 22, 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The passage selected for the Sermon is taken from the Gospel:

When asked where his authority derived, St John the Baptist said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."

The motto of my school was, Vox Clamantis in Deserto, which translates as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. I remember it most clearly on the school seal, which features an Indian and the Bible, because Dartmouth was actually founded as a Bible School for Native Americans. It was started as an act of atonement. Its founder had made his fortune selling liquor to the Indians, and as he repented of that livelihood, he offered the school as restitution for the damage he had done. The passage has been prominent in my life for a long time, but it isn't an easy passage to unravel.

When the Pharisees meet John, they don't inquire of him as much as they chastise him with the question what it is he has to say for himself. After all, he has been condemning

them, the very nobility and privileged of the temple. "How dare you" is their tone when they ask him, Who is it you say that you are. Before he responds to their indignation, telling them who he is not, which is the Messiah, he tells them who he is, the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

In essence, He is telling them he is the herald of the Messiah. His condemnation of their pride and materialism is the trumpet flourish that announces the arrival of the King of Kings. He makes himself Isaiah, or the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic proclamation. That was not a very helpful response to the Pharisees. Had he said he was the Messiah, they would have presumed to test and discredit him. Had He said he was the Son of God, they could even killed him, as they did Jesus, in their goal of shutting him up. To be confronted by the self proclaimed voice crying out in the wilderness was singularly un-helpful. They returned to their masters perplexed and impotent in their intent to harm John the Baptist. They missed the point, the purpose the herald was there to proclaim. The response to hearing the voice of one crying in the wilderness was the point made in the Epistle, Repent and Rejoice. The messiah is near. Our occupation and

oppression is about to end. We are about to be delivered and redeemed, not from the Romans, but from sin and death, oppressors more fearful than any legion of Rome.

In the Old Testament lesson appointed for this Sunday, Isaiah tells us how we should receive the voice crying in the wilderness.

“The wilderness and solitary place shall be glad for them. The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing. The (world) will see the glory of the Lord and the excellency of our God. Strengthen ye the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees, ...the Lord will come to save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame shall leap as a hart and the dumb shall sing...the thirsty land shall become a spring of water...and a highway shall be there, and a way And it shall be called the way of holiness...the redeemed shall walk there. and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”
Isaiah 35

The Pharisees were greeted with the proclamation of Victory over those eternal enemies of man, the devil and his servant death, and instead of rejoicing, resounding and echoing the proclamation in advance of the Angels, they left aggravated and unfulfilled. In the end their unwillingness to embrace and celebrate victory leaves them unredeemed.

This morning, it is our turn. The Voice of one crying in the wilderness is proclaimed to us.

How will we receive it. Will we be unfulfilled and aggravated? Imminently, in three days, we will celebrate the Incarnation of the Word, the birth of our Savior. On the night before, this church will be packed. Among the crowd will be complete strangers, and those we don't see often, what we call C and E'ers, Christmas and Easter Christians. How will we receive them?

Yes it's true, the Church will be crowded, the parking lot will be full, there will be noises we don't usually hear, and people who don't know our customs and traditions will distract us from our prayers and ministrations. How will we react? Will we embrace them, rejoice that they are with us, envelop them with the kind of godly love that makes hunger to share their every Sunday with us? Or, will we affirm their fears of being rejected and isolated. Will we raise our voices and our hearts, take hold of their hands and make them feel wanted and a part of our families, or will lower our eyelids, glancing sideways in smug self righteousness. The Church should not be comfortably empty. We should pray that parking lot will always be crowded, and pews uncomfortably full, and our attentions turned to helping the unfamiliar share our worship service and our joy.

The people that are coming are the people we were meant to evangelize. They are the given to us by our Lord. Let's make sure we aren't the voice muttering, “there is no room at inn”, but instead the voice that responds, Rejoice and join us, now, every week, and for eternity.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen