

“With Joyful Expectancy”
3rd Advent – Dec. 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:14-20

3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 3:15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. 3:16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. 3:17 The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing 3:18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. 3:19 I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. 3:20 At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Phillippians 4:4-7

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 4:6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. :9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 3:14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." 3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

He was only about 5' 8" tall, but no one in any congregation he ever stood before would have testified that he was any less than an intimidating 6' 5". Looming from the pulpit or equally as comfortable on a stump under a tent he thundered forth the word of God to those who on these occasions as rare as once a month would gather for a combination of reasons.

First of all these were scotch irish dirt farmers. Some of them already fifth generation from the potato fields of Ireland to the tobacco fields of eastern N.C. They believed in a basic set of rules that made others refer to them as hard shell. These were Calvinist, poorer than their Presbyterian counterparts and more fundamentally oriented. Worship was important but the small communities of primitive babptists, as they were called, could not afford full time pastors. So he was on a circuit. Once a month for sure. Twice if they were lucky.

But mostly it was him. His countenance. His presence. His words. His voice. He had a single suit, to have another was sinful. The baptist had said so. If you had two coats you had one to many. Rather than camels hair though, his suit was pitch black wool. And he wore it year round. Regardless of temperature. And it gets hot and cold in easter n.c. There was also a brilliant white shirt, with a collar so stiffly starched it might cut you if you turned your head to quickly. Black brogans, or work shoes, always polished and a narrow black tie finished the outfit. Save for the most important accessory, his leather bound King James. It was huge and when he held it up it would block the sun. He believed absolutely like John,

that there was good news to tell....but it had to have a certain tone to make it heard. And most of the time that tone was harsh and unyielding.

In other words, his congregations would not be surprised at all to hear themselves called a brood of vipers. Not at all. In fact they expected it.

About twice a year the faithful of a number of the congregations would gather, 'at the river' for a camp meeting, which would always include the sacrament of baptism. The preacher would take off the shoes, and the wool jacket...roll up his sleeves and stand knee deep, "crying out in the wilderness" for all those who needed to give their souls to the Lord to get themselves down there to be dipped in the water and touched by the fire.

When a penitent would make his/her way down the bank and into water they expected to be gripped in fear, not only of the fires of hell of which he spoke, but by the man himself. But upon approaching him, what they found was an amazing embrace, a firm handshake, and a face that belied what they had heard and thought of him. It was a face streaked with what at first one would think was sweat, but it was tears. Tears that flowed freely each time he said, "I baptize you with water, arise and receive the fire of the Holy Spirit." This was what he lived for. This was it. Watching the faithful of God, come to God. And to each he would repeat the ancient formula as he looked them in the eye and sent them to live the life God intended for them to live. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 4:6 Do

not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

God’s messengers take their greatest joy in sharing the Good news of God’s love. The call to rejoice is the heart of the message.

In a richly colored masterpiece from the early Renaissance, the Italian artist Veneziano shows John the Baptist with the Madonna and Child. Mary and the infant Jesus occupy the exact center of the painting, but it is John who dominates and catches the viewer’s eye at first. Mary and Jesus are bathed in soft colors and their shapes conveyed by gently flowing lines. John is angular, dressed in a rough, tufted garment of brown fur. Hollow-eyed, he stares directly at you, the viewer. You stare back. And then, by a skill which only artists understand, you find your eyes drawn down his muscled arm to a powerful and pointing hand. You follow a tough, extended forefinger, and in a moment you are gazing at a child in its mother’s arms.

That’s John the Baptist! Rugged. Direct. An affront to the human consciousness . . . and pointing to our Lord. We rejoice today because John

points us to the one who is to come. On this third Sunday of Advent another word is sent to us by God in the guise of those who would call us to rejoice. Don't mistake this for an early invitation to the party. It is still yet to come. What this is, is another voice calling us to preparation. Repentance again for sure. God gives a task. And the prophetic person responds. Sometimes the voice is harsh, because, harsh is necessary sometimes to get our attention. And the voice is persistent. Calling to us over and over to prepare ourselves for change. But the word is Rejoice. Have Joy, not because of what we can do. But because of what God has done. Get ready to have real joy.

At each baptism service the old preacher would use the same sermon. Maybe a slight variation on the theme, but the same sermon. First of all, until he was flushed in the face and his voice was crackling and the spittle settled in the corners of his mouth, he would let these people know just how evil they were. Not an evil resident in their deeds alone, but an evil that resided in them because all people, himself included, were part of the fall. Part of the falling away, the turning of the back on God – in our sin. Just as he reached a fever pitch, when one present could smell the sulphur, and feel the oppresant heat not just of the summers day but of the very fires burning the chaff, he would stop....mid sentence...glaring out at them. And pronounce that they were completely and utterly lost. And here, his voice would soften so that they would have to strain to

hear, as he would say, 'but God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son....so rejoice sinners.....rejoice you brood of vipers,,,,God is calling you home.

It was as clear as day, just as in his preaching he stopped and went to God, so too were they to stop, where they were, turn, repent and come back, to where a beneficent, loving God, fully opposite of what he had been proclaiming, awaited them in the waters of the faith, to be changed. To be redeemed.

What he gave is what we are offered today by Zephaniah who says, Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 3:15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you..." And when Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice."

And even John, whose task is, like that of all prophets, to bring the message of repentance and hoped for salvation. That the one who comes will execute the judgement and the forgiveness. John envisions a kind of divine enforcer, one who will come with such power and might that all before him who are like chaff who deserve to be swept away into the fires of hell. But, John also knows that somehow this isn't just terrible, horrifying news. But good news, because repentance, going the other way changes all that negative to positive, to prepare the 'way' is to prepare for God's presence and where there is evidence of God's great power and love, there is evidence of God's justice, and mercy, and unknown as yet to John a new era, a new covenant, in God's grace. And having heard John's powerful prophecy

we, like the old brood of vipers, ask the same question, "And we, what should we do?"

What should we do to get ready for Christmas? We should remember our baptism. We should get rid of the excess stuff in our lives to make room for the Christ child. We should throw into a clothes basket all the contents of our closets which leave no room for the transforming power which enters the world in the darkest days of the year. We should humble ourselves before our God so that Jesus can enter our hearts this year. Even, now in the midst of our parties and gatherings and programs, we should be preparing ourselves – to rejoice. Our savior is coming.

Be one who rejoices