

**Sunday, December 16, 2018**  
**Third Sunday of Advent (Year C)**

Zephaniah 3.14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12.2-6); Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18

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Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, which derives its name from the Latin word *Gaudete*, meaning “Rejoice,” the first word of the traditional introit for this day's mass. The words that we hear in our Epistle reading: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4.4). A call to rejoice in the Lord because he is near. Expressing the joy that we derive from being in the presence of Christ. And the accompanying “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” which guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4.7). Paul writes these words as a reminder to the Church in Philippi that Christ will soon come again, bringing a renewed joy when he returns to usher in the end of the ages. A reminder that, for Paul, joy supports and upholds those whose lives even now belong to Christ. Words of hope that encompass our own understanding of the meaning of Advent.

As this season of anticipation, expectation, and preparation rapidly draws to a close, our readings for today have a unified theme intended to evoke the sense of joy that we experience as we anticipate the coming of our Lord into our midst, be it the joy of his birth that we celebrate a mere nine days from now or the joy we will experience at his long-awaited return. And the joy we experience in between as we seek to faithfully live as followers of Christ.

This is something that was anticipated, that has been longed for, throughout salvation history. We see this in our first reading from the Prophet Zephaniah. Now, admittedly, most of the Book of Zephaniah is pretty much a downer. Its writing prompted by Judah's continuing refusal to obey the covenant with God, even as it witnessed Israel's exile at the hands of the Assyrians just a generation or two before. Exile that was prompted by Israel's own disobedience to God.

But the Book ends with the portion we heard today, which instead of foretelling doom and gloom, turns to a song of joy at the promise of liberation and redemption. “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! 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” (Zeph 3.14-15). A song that promises comfort and consolation to those who wait patiently for the Lord. For those who turn and follow God's will. For God will come into their midst as their king, saving them from their enemies, gathering them home, and bringing salvation and forgiveness instead of a time of judgement. This is a song of joy and praise to God who has and will liberate the people, physically and spiritually. This is a message of hope to the people, in the form of a vision of a restored Israel, with the Lord reigning as her king. A message of anticipation and expectation, a message of promise and hope.

The response to Zephaniah's vision and promise of hope comes from the First Song of Isaiah—Canticle 9 in the *Book of Common Prayer*. This is another song of joy at the promise of salvation. This time at the promise of the return of Judah from exile in Babylon. A psalm of

thanksgiving at the promise of God sending the Messiah—the ideal king—to rule over the people and to bring salvation.

But then we have our Gospel reading, in which John the Baptist appears on the scene and seems to throw cold water on the joy that we have with the anticipation of the coming of our Lord. John the Baptist, who greets those coming out to be baptized with “You brood of vipers!” (Lk 3.7). If that’s not enough to kill the joyous mood . . . John’s message sets a very different tone from the joy and exultation of the other readings.

John goes on to name the horror undoubtedly experienced by those who are coming to be baptized—those who view themselves as good Jews seeking to be faithful to God’s laws by repenting of their sins. “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’” (Lk 3.8). Although, for some, this admonishment may not be too far from the truth. After all, there was an attitude among some—particularly the religious authorities of the day—that any judgment against them would be deferred, or altogether avoided, because of who they were: descendants of Abraham. That because their famed ancestor had been deemed as righteous before God, they too must be righteous. In other words, they were resting on their religious and spiritual laurels. And not even their own laurels, but rather they were attempting to ride on the coattails of the God-proclaimed righteousness of a distant ancestor who lived nearly 2,000 years before.

John then further puts those present in their place with even less-joyful imagery. “Even now the axe 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” (Lk 3.9). Trees being an allusion to those who descend from, grow from, a common root—from Abraham. That regardless of who our ancestors are, all are subject to God’s judgment. You can’t rely on the faithfulness of someone father back in your family tree. It’s all about your own righteousness.

And John wraps up with a cautionary image regarding the long-awaited Messiah. That all will be subject to judgment under him. Of this Messiah, John notes “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3.16). Kind of a scary imagery—baptism with fire. And that “His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor . . . but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Lk 3.17). The implication of all this is that people were fearing that the end may be near and so came to be baptized to have their sins forgiven. To save their own hides. But if they think that merely being dunked in water is enough to save them, they are sorely mistaken. They need to truly repent—to turn their lives around. To live into what God asks of them. That, according to John, is to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk 3.8a).

Despite his harsh rhetoric, John actually indicates that this bearing of fruits worthy of repentance is not as hard as one might think. He is not asking them to give up everything they have. Only share of their abundance. If you have an extra coat, give it to someone who needs it. If you have extra food, share it with someone who is hungry. John is not asking them to live in the wilderness like he chose to do. He is not asking them—particularly the soldiers and tax collectors—to deny their allegiance to Rome. He is not asking those such as the soldiers and tax collectors to give up their jobs and find some line of work that is “more Christian.”

What John is really preaching, what is being asked, is really basic life's lessons. Things that they should have learned as children. To share, to be honest, to be fair, to not bully, to play nice with others. All things that are in their reach. Nothing particularly hard or onerous. What John is urging them is not to rely on ancient claims of righteousness, but to demonstrate their character and behavior as being consistent with that of Abraham, who is held up throughout scripture as the model of faithfulness and righteousness, especially as related to hospitality to strangers.

The baptism John performed was meant to signal one's submission to God, profession of new or renewed commitment to God's will, and their inclusion within the restored people of God. That in the act of being baptized, the lives of those present would be transformed, in keeping with their self-professed status as the children of Abraham. That they would live into their transformed lives by repenting, turning around, and demonstrate their newly professed faithfulness, their reclaimed righteousness, by bearing "fruits worthy of repentance." By putting their righteousness into action by caring for those of God's beloved children who are in need. John teaches that preparation for God's reign is not a matter of identity but of the bearing fruits of mercy, justice, generosity, and love.

The message that John seeks to convey is that where they are in their lives is precisely where they are called to be. And they are to live into that to the fullest. Which means that they are to discern what is right for them as to how to be faithful to who they are AND to be faithful to God's word.

All this begs the question, how are we like those who came out to be baptized by John? What do we need to repent of, to turn around in our own lives? And in light of the remainder of our readings, how do we find joy and peace in our daily lives? Especially in agonizing times such as those that were the realities for Luke and the Philippians—times of oppression, bigotry, and persecution. Especially in the difficult times we may and often do find ourselves in.

In the midst of all his talk about vipers and axes at the roots of trees and winnowing forks separating wheat from chaff and unquenchable fire, John offers a very practical way for us to turn around and to live into the righteousness God bestows on each of us. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Bear fruit that demonstrates our desire to turn around and live God's word. Even if not perfect, to make the attempt.

To be sure, we can all do better at living as God would have us do. To better live the Gospel in our own words and actions. The good news to be found in the midst of John's less-than-joyful imagery is that Christ is coming. There is joy in receiving this gift of God's love. And while Christ brings judgement, he also invites us to repentance. And there is great joy to be found in being given yet one more opportunity to turn back to God. Christ bestows on us his Holy Spirit to guide and support us in our efforts to turn around. And there is great joy to be found in having help in our weakness. But most important, Christ offers us the grace of salvation and forgiveness out of sheer love. And there is certainly great joy in that precious, unmerited gift.

The coming of Christ, whose birth we celebrate in just nine days, was a priceless demonstration of God's love for us. We show our love for God by giving of ourselves, by bearing fruits that demonstrate our faithfulness and righteousness in word and deed. Bearing fruits that demonstrate our intentions to truly live according to God's will. When we fully live into Christ's message of love for God and love of others, we find that we experience joy not only in our receiving of God's gift to us, but we also find joy in sharing that gift with others. A joy that is beyond compare. So, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."