

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Canticle 9
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Advent 3C
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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So, you brood of vipers, Does this gospel reading sound like good news to you? I think I'd prefer to go back to the first readings. To Zephaniah rejoicing with gladness, because the Lord has taken away judgment and presumably all the sin that caused it, and now rejoices over us with gladness, renewing us in great love. I'd like to go back to Isaiah whose voice rings out with joy, rejoicing in the Lord who has done great things for us, or even to Paul, whom I often find rather cranky... even Paul is rejoicing this morning and exhorting us to do the same. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! That all feels so much better than the "good news" brought to us this morning by John the Baptist.

The third Sunday of Advent heralds a bit of a change for us. If you have an Advent wreath at home, you'll likely find that today's candle is pink. That pink candle in the Advent wreath signifies joy. No longer hearing only God's judgment of a world gone wrong, today we sing praises to the God who loves us, who has forgiven us, who has turned our shame into praises and our heartache into joy! Today we rejoice in the God who is making all things new and has promised always to be near. God is coming to be one of us, God loves us, God has claimed us as God's very own! Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice!

But all that joy and gladness is interrupted by John shouting at us about the wrath to come, scolding us into repentance and calling us some pretty nasty names. *Repent, you brood of vipers. What makes you think you'll escape the coming judgment? You think being the children of Abraham has you covered? God can turn stones into children of Abraham.* Now there's a way to win over your listeners. But there is a reason for John's cry in the midst of all the joy. It seems that before all the rejoicing, there is repenting to be done. And while watching and waiting and hoping and even joy permeate our Advent readings, repentance is ever present, particularly in Luke's gospel. Luke very much wants us to recognize John as the last and greatest of the prophets. John's voice cried out in the wilderness of the Palestinian desert 2,000 years ago, but it still speaks to our hearts today. Turn away from what is evil and repent! Bear fruit worthy of the God who loves you! Look deep inside yourselves, seek love and justice and mercy and peace, turn around, change your minds, change your hearts, change your lives!

It seems to me that John could have found a better way to get us to do all that. Being threatened by unquenchable fire and the axe at the foot of the tree, being called a brood of vipers and admonished to repent doesn't feel all that great. I'm pretty sure it would have sent me running. But not the people who were looking for John in the wilderness. We're told huge crowds of people came seeking his baptism – which was not the baptism of forgiveness. It was the baptism of repentance. It is utterly incomprehensible to me, that the people didn't give up on John and his whole repentance project and find an easier way. But they didn't. Instead, one

by one, they asked “What do we need to do?” And “What do we need to do?” And “What about us, what shall we do?” You. Yes you, the fashionista. You have more coats, and surely more shoes, than you need. Share. And you over there, the foodie. You have food enough in your pantry to feed the neighborhood. Feed the neighborhood. And you, the one with the big, important powerful job. Care more about justice than you do about getting ahead, and remember that you are a servant whose real job is to ensure dignity for the people you serve.

John speaks into each of their lives, offering real and tangible actions for each one to take in their very real and tangible lives. He seems to know that even a brood of vipers can take right action, and that taking right action will change them from the outside, in. Living a life of justice and mercy and love was to repent and repentance, as we heard last week, is a way to prepare for Jesus, to come and change our hearts. You’ll notice that John doesn’t offer grandiose or universal platitudes about making the world a better place. Instead, he tells the people that the way they live their own daily lives... the kind of consumers they are, the way they behave when they go to work, the way they use their money and power – all of these things really matter. And while his answer differs for every questioner, each answer speaks very specifically into the people’s unique and specific lives. And most importantly every one of John’s answers require action, with God’s love as the source and justice for all people as the goal. Share. Don’t keep more than you need. Treat others kindly. Tell the truth.

As we come ever closer to the nativity of the One who has come to be God with us, John the Baptist reminds us - and in no small way - that Advent is a time for self-examination, and that our self-examination ought to lead us to take action in the course of our everyday lives. And while he didn’t have really great social skills, I think John’s admonitions were meant less to be finger-pointing and blaming than they were to bring forth the very best in people, to encourage them, to encourage us, to live lives of integrity and action that bring forth justice and mercy and peace, and of course, God’s love.

John was telling people how to behave, but more importantly, he was reminding them of who they were... children of God whose lives were to bear good fruit. “Don’t climb the tree, sit on a branch and watch what is happening in the world around you,” he seems to be saying. “Become the trees that bear fruit.” God will not swoop down and fix the world. God came among us, came to be one of us, precisely to make this point. God incarnates. God incarnated in Mary’s newborn baby boy and God incarnates in us too. God is not distant and manipulative. God is present in each and every one of us and the way God works in the world is through our presence and action.

It is not enough to care. It is not enough to hope. It is not enough to pray. It is not even enough to love if our love does not take action. So if it seems that God is not fixing things, we do well to remember that God works through us, so perhaps we are not fixing things. We can’t simply pray for an end to injustice, racism, climate change or corruption. We need to change the structures that allow and encourage such things. We can’t simply hope there will be an end to hunger. We need to feed people. We can’t simply care about refugee families. We must take part in finding homes and communities for them. We can’t simply pray for an end to climate change. We need

to change the way we buy things and use things... the way we get around in the world. And we can't claim that we love our neighbors if we won't bring them to church, take them a meal, visit them when they are sick, and share in their heartaches as well as their joys. Believing in God isn't an idea we carry around, it's a call to action. I think that's what John was trying to tell us.

It's a hard thing to be constantly told to repent and all the while hearing about end times. After all, Advent is a new beginning, the season of hope and expectation, of watching and longing and wondering. What about the baby Jesus we're waiting for? What about the love and peace and reconciliation he will bring when he comes among us as the living God? It's true, Jesus came, and comes among us as the living God, the God whose name is love. But as it turns out, that requires an apocalypse. In order for Jesus to live in us, the ax must be put to the tree of self-importance. The chaff of greed and getting ahead must be burned away and turned to nothing but ash. The Advent of the newborn king, the king of love, the redeemer of our whole crazy, violent, selfish and broken world really does herald the end of the world as we know it. No more despair. No more hoping and praying for God to fix things. No more abstract caring about the world. No more talk of love without working for justice and peace and dignity for all people. No more thoughts and prayers.

Advent is a time of watching and waiting and hoping and expecting and longing for God to come to us and moving among us in ways we don't expect and could never even imagine. It's the third Sunday of Advent. It's nearly over. Don't miss this opportunity to slow down a bit, to make a space for quiet, to create room in your hearts to listen for the very particular ways God is calling you, yes, you, to take action that will love the world back into wholeness. God is speaking to every single one of us. Are we listening?

Advent is that very special time when we're invited into a particular space of waiting and watching and attending... and all so that we can make the space to listen. God is calling us to love the world back into wholeness. What is your part? That's what John meant when he talked about bearing fruit. Our watching and waiting and listening and longing becomes holy and sacred when it moves us to take action on behalf of God's beloved people and creation. We don't have the physical presence of John the Baptist walking around this neighborhood. So who will speak the love of God, who will take action for the love of God, who will incarnate the love of God if not you? If not me? The whole wide world is watching and waiting and longing and hoping. For us. Amen.