

Advent 3 (C)

December 15, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church,

Laurel Springs, NJ

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Canticle 9

Luke 3:7-18

Today is the day! Today is the day that we get to light the Rose Candle on our Advent Wreath. Today is the day I get to wear. My beautiful, handcrafted rose stole that was an ordination gift. The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete, when translated from Latin, means *rejoice*. We know that Advent is a season of waiting and today we are called to be joyful as we await the coming of Christ our Savior.

God, through Zephaniah, offers us a glimpse of a hopeful future and causes us to **“rejoice and exalt with all our heart.”** Isaiah reminds us of all the ways God has delivered us, is delivering us, and will deliver us. He invites us to shout aloud and sing for joy because we shall **“draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.”** And our cheerleader, Saint Paul, strongly urges us to **“rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!”**

All of us, both collectively and personally have been experiencing tough times these last few years. With the suffering, loss, uncertainty, and state

of our beautiful and broken world, how can we hear these words and rejoice?

In our minds, joy tends to overlap with happiness. Happiness is often connected with what is happening to us and around us. Happiness usually lasts for just a season. When we are discouraged and afraid, rejoicing in the Lord can be a hard sell. But the truth is that Joy is not usually inspired by happy circumstances. Poet and author David Whyte writes, *“to feel a full and untrampled joy is to have become fully generous: to allow ourselves to be joyful, is to have walked through the doorway of fear.”* And joy, unlike happiness, lasts no matter what the challenging circumstances.

The prophets looked forward to the day of the Lord’s coming as a time of great joy. Even Zephaniah who has been called the most despondent of all the prophets, kept the last word for joy -joy over the Lord’s presence, joy over renewal and restoration, and joy over coming home. While Isaiah also speaks of doom and gloom, he looks forward to the Lord’s coming as a time for shouting joyfully **“surely God is my salvation.”** Isaiah looks forward to the Lord’s coming as a day when the people would **“drink their fill of salvation, like someone drawing freshwater from a well”, certainly** a day of great rejoicing.

It is believed that the apostle Paul was under house arrest when he wrote the words we heard from his letter to the Philippians. And still, Paul could say, “Rejoice!” I wonder what he had to rejoice about in that situation? Well, Paul rejoiced because he looked forward to the Lord’s coming, but he also rejoiced because the Lord is always near. Paul

seemed to have experienced the Lord's constant presence in his imprisonment and so, he could say, "Rejoice!" Paul carried the joy of Advent with him wherever he went - even in a Roman jail.

Advent is not only a season of waiting. It is also a time of preparation - a time of looking for the coming of the Lord, for the fulfillment of God's promised restoration, for the peace that overcomes all violence, and for that perfect love that cast out fear.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was sent into difficult, complicated times-times like we are experiencing. And this message was simple: repent; turn your lives around; turn back to God. For John, repentance was not about beating ourselves up for things done or left and done; to repent total transformation, the kind of transformation that bears fruit. Carmen has told us many times repentance means to turn around.

Snakes are what John the Baptist called the people who ventured into the desert: "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" Yet, they do not turn and run. Instead, they listen to his sermon. You must bear fruit, he tells them do not rely on your ancestry, your tradition, or your history. This is about you preparing yourselves for the one who is to come. When John finished preaching, they asked "How do we repent? What should we do?"

John does not ask the people to change the world, but rather to change themselves. He does not tell them to leave their lives and stay with him

or to start a revolution; he tells the crowd who came to him to consider sharing what they have with the cold and the hungry. He told the tax collectors to be honest and fair. The soldiers, he cautioned to act with integrity, avoiding abuse of their power. “Go home,” John told them. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your friends. Go home and live your lives as deeply and this generously as you can right now. Do what the Lord requires of you and do it now. Be generous now! Be merciful now! Do justice now!

What does all this mean for us? In this Advent season, we are seeking the answers to the question, “**What should we do?**” as we wait and look forward to the coming of the Messiah. Are we engaging in the kind of deep self-reflection that leads to action? Or have we fallen into complacency? Are we gathering like the crowds in John story, moving towards genuine repentance? Or are we turning away? In our baptisms, we are marked as Christ own forever, and it is the meaning of this mark that John called his followers to embrace and is calling us to embrace. Through baptism, we are cleansed and renewed with water from the spring of salvation before sent out to serve.

We might think that focusing our attention on what we belong for, but do not yet have might be a cause for discouragement rather than Joy. But, perhaps, it is that very act of waiting and watching and looking for the coming of God that inspires great joy. The gospel writer calls John’s exhortation “good news”- we talked about that a little bit last week. And it is, especially if we believe that we are not worthy of God’s saving grace. Nothing in our lives is beyond redemption. Knowing and accepting this is reason enough for rejoicing.

This is not easy. That is why it takes intentional preparation and repentance -which means amending our lives and turning toward God. That is what we must do to prepare in this holy season. Advent is beckoning us to do just that, and it encourages us with a promise rather than a threat: the promise of the coming embrace of Christ and the gift of abundant life that he brings.

John the Baptist appeared as an itinerant preacher. Yet, ironically, he is remembered by the church as the patron saint of spiritual joy. Perhaps he earned that title since, earlier in Luke's gospel, Elizabeth expressed how the baby in her womb leaped for joy at the presence of Mary and Jesus. It was John's great joy to always be pointing to Jesus. Today, it is our great joy to be waiting for the coming of Jesus.

On this Gaudette Sunday, as we wait and prepare, we are also called to rejoice. The coming of the Messiah and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the good news the angel will speak of when appearing to the shepherds, ***“For behold I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”*** This brings us hope even amid our struggles so that when the Christ child arrives at the manger, we can rejoice and sing with gusto, Joy to the World! The Lord is come!” For now, and for nine more days, we pray, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.” Amen.