

Advent III Sermon 12 16 18

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7;

Luke 3:7-18

Grace to you and peace, from God our creator, source of all love and light and life; and from Jesus, the Christ, the Light coming into the World. Amen.

That's not the kind of sermon you're used to hearing, is it? I wonder what your reaction would be if Pastor Martha or I began our sermons yelling, "You brood of vipers! What are you doing here this morning? Why did you even show up? With your very lives, show that you recognize the significance of repentance!"

I couldn't do it. In fact, it made me very uncomfortable just pretending. But I have to admit, John accomplished exactly what he intended by engaging the people in that way. He got their attention. And their response was spot on: "What then should we do?"

To my mind that's the point of a good sermon. To get the hearers to look at themselves and their own lives in response to the Word of God. The very best compliment I can receive is something like, "I was thinking about your sermon..."

I think it is my job to search the scriptures and hold up for you a vision of the world God intends; what the reign of God, inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ, looks like, so that you can see yourselves caught up in that vision of hope, and joy, and promise for all creation. In a very different style, that's exactly what John has done in speaking to the crowds who came to him in the wilderness, seeking baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

It seems to me we pretty regularly find ourselves in the wilderness, don't we? We expect life to proceed in some orderly fashion, to abide by some expectation that we can make our plans, accomplish what we intend, that life will basically "make sense." But all too often, it doesn't. We or someone we love gets a terrible diagnosis. Or loses their job. Or their sobriety. Or our friends move away and we find ourselves deeply lonely. Or we fear the way our country is going. Or we feel powerless over the changing climate. Or the daily grind of life simply wears us down. I might go so far as to say most of life is spent in the wilderness.

But the good news is that's exactly where we encounter Holiness. The crowds that swarmed out to see John who was in the wilderness, crying out about preparing a new way, a way by which the Holy One of God would arrive? Who made their way out of the center of Empire in search of...they're not quite sure what? They are us. We are them. People longing for a different kind of life, without perhaps even knowing what they're looking for. And John, with his harsh start up and words of challenge, got their attention. He lifted up a vision of the kind of world God is creating and invited – challenged – them to live into that vision and promise.

First he questioned their motives. Why did you come here? To rest on your confidence and privilege and entitlement? If that's what you're looking for, you might as well go home. Because the way of God will turn your life upside down, and inside out, and it will bring you joy beyond expectation. There is a major reconstruction project going on and it will turn your life in a new direction.

While we think we are preparing to receive again the baby Jesus, John is pointing ahead to the one more powerful than he; the Holy

One of God who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Because God wants more for us than drudgery. Or complacency. Or fear. Or greed. God intends a life of deep joy for all creation.

Today is traditionally known as “Gaudete Sunday” – Rejoice, Sunday, and the passages appointed for today are filled with singing and rejoicing. It’s a reminder to pause in the midst of all our preparing and wondering and anxiety and fear – and even fun! – to recognize the ongoing work of God. From Isaiah to Zephaniah scripture calls out to us to remember God’s faithfulness in restoring life and wholeness to God’s people who have been living in despair. In spite of our failings, God is determined to turn our shame into praise, to rejoice over us with gladness, to gather us in love and bring us home. The promise is sure: God is trustworthy.

So we might ask, along with John’s crowd in the wilderness, “What then shall we do?” How do we “bear fruit worthy of repentance?” With a vision so grand, how can we possible measure up?

In spite of John’s powerful critique, his answer is quite simple. He doesn’t call them to revolution. He doesn’t exhort them to otherworldly contemplation. He sends them home, and tells them to share what they have with those who have not. If you have more coats than you need, give one away. If you have an abundance of food, make sure your neighbor can eat as well. Simply put, be who you have been created to be; and do it well.

Even Tax collectors and soldiers were among the crowd that went out to see John in the wilderness. Held in contempt by the Jewish people because they were seen as traitors, cooperating with the

Roman occupation, tax collectors were frequently guilty of collecting whatever they could get away with, keeping for themselves what was above the appointed tax they were charged to collect. Soldiers were tempted to abuse their power to gain advantage by extortion or threats. John's word to them was not to leave their vocation, but to fulfill their responsibilities honorably. Even tax collectors and soldiers can love their neighbors as themselves.

You just never know where love might show up. Seminarian Korla Masters shared this experience on Facebook:

"To the neighbor in the silver hatchback,
When you stopped in the middle of the traffic lane on 26th Ave and told me you were sorry for my loss, I was surprised. I was surprised because, even though I was putting some (fake) flowers at the memorial for Hailu Degaga, I didn't know him in his lifetime. I'm mostly just a neighbor who thinks memorials should be tended and this one is close to home.

I was also surprised because I didn't really know how to tell you, as you were stopped in the southbound lane of a busy street, that my cousin's child died two weeks ago. And that my congregation has done four funerals in two weeks, three for people under 60. And that just this morning, a really dear family friend; an important queer role model for me as a kid; someone who my family spent a lot of Thanksgivings and Christmases with, died. And so I was tending to Mr. Degaga's memorial because it's a thing within my control.

I was also surprised because I didn't really know how to explain that, while I didn't know Mr. Degaga, his memorial is close to home. I remember vividly looking at my phone one last time before bed last summer and seeing that a cyclist had been hit and killed at the intersection my dad lives on and bikes through every

day. I remember feeling like I was about to throw up. And so while I didn't know Mr. Degaga and don't feel his death the way his family does, he was my neighbor. And I'll remember the day he died for the rest of my life.

There was not time to tell you this novel's worth of information while you were stopped in the southbound lane. But when I thanked you, it was for this novel's worth of reasons. And again: thank you. For stopping and tending to a stranger's heart in the middle of getting wherever you were going. That was very thoughtful. Thank you.”

Luther Seminary professor Matthew Skinner reminds us that Luke’s gospel of liberation announces the reign of God in “the rhetoric of cosmic transformation and massive social upheaval,” but it also “calls us to participate in a drawn-out, more hands-on transformation project. When we dig deeper into the Gospel, salvation manifests itself through Jesus in local ways, one scene at a time, one meal at a time, one interaction at a time.”

Sometimes living the good news is as simple as sharing what you have, or offering a word of comfort to a stranger. Sometimes the gospel calls us to more public, collective work of transforming systems of injustice so that all may live as God intends. But in every case, no matter how frightening or disconcerting, the love of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a message to be anticipated and responded to with joy.

God is trustworthy. God’s transforming work may startle us and put us off balance, but it is always God’s desire to turn your shame into praise, “to rejoice over you with gladness, to renew you in love...and to bring you home.”

Each reading appointed for today is filled with abounding joy, proclaiming trust in God's saving work. With God's people across the ages we are invited to join in rejoicing in all circumstances. I cannot say it better than the apostle Paul:

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

What then shall we do? Rejoice.

Amen.