

2024 Advent 3

Listen to the themes of today's readings:

From Zephaniah: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart"

From Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"

And John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke: "You brood of vipers..."

(la la la) One of these things is not like the other...

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent, also known as "Gaudete" Sunday or Rejoice! Sunday. It's a time when we are encouraged to hope that God's kingdom is nearer at hand than it ever has been before, to believe that it is within reach. The first two readings fit the theme, but that third one...comes out of left field, doesn't it? Where is the joy? The end of that passage ends "So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people." Huh?

It might be helpful for us to place the first two readings in their larger context.

If this passage from Zephaniah is the only one you know, you'll have a false impression of the whole thing. For most of the book the prophet has been chastising Israel for its faithlessness, its failure to live up to the standards of generosity and hospitality set by God, warning them that their actions will have consequences. It's a long and painful thread of "you reap what you sow" and is believed to be an attempt by the prophet to make sense of their time in Exile.

The lectionary jumps in at "the good part," the place where the tone shifts from scolding and condemnation to the reminder that God's desire for God's people is to be Immanuel, God-with-Us, wherever we are. We hear God promise to "restore the fortunes" of Zion. I don't think that's simply about returning their property and wealth to them. I think it has a deeper meaning.

God will restore to them a sense of hope for the future. God is assuring them that, after the consequences have been lived out, there is still potential to do good in the world. They are not lost causes. There's a reason to be joyful.

Then that wonderful passage from Philippians, about rejoicing always. Paul is exhorting the Christians in that city to find their sense of identity in GOD, and to commit themselves to the well-being of their community of faith.

Some of you may remember that Paul was writing from prison. He had every reason to be despondent, to expect the worst of his situation. And instead he writes, “REJOICE.” He urges them to model “gentleness” to a world marked by competitiveness and violence. He promises them that when they keep themselves grounded in God and the love of Christ, they will be filled with a peace that is not comprehensible to the rest of the world.

Another reason to be joyful.

And then...there’s John the Baptist.

There is no way to soften the blow. “You brood of vipers” is harsh, and it only gets worse as John warns them that they are in danger of being cut down. But, to paraphrase Frederick Buechner, sometimes the news has to be bad before it can be good. Sometimes you have to take a long hard look at the situation before you can even hope to see a way out of it. John is holding up a mirror to the people, asking them to be honest with themselves.

And the people do it. The tax collectors and soldiers come to be baptized, ready to make a change. They ask what they need to do to be ready. He tells the people to be generous. If they have two coats, and they see someone with none, give one coat up. John tells the tax

collectors to collect no more than the amount prescribed. John tells the soldiers not to abuse their power.

Pay attention to this.

John is not telling them to stop being tax collectors and soldiers. He is not saying they have to stop being who they are, he is telling them, instead, to find a new way to do what they do. It's subversive, really. It's easy enough to withdraw from society and go be holy someplace where everyone has the same goals and values and ideals as you do. It's another thing altogether to go back to the same old, same old with a new attitude and a new approach. But John knows that the only way to make a difference in the WHOLE world is to go into the seediest, most corrupt places and prepare the way for God's kingdom to come near even there.

THAT is why this is good news. It tells us that God DOES confront injustice, God DOES provide for the needy. God DOES extend redemption and forgiveness and a second chance. But we have to be willing to cooperate with God's purposes. We have to be willing to look in the mirror and own up to what we see there. And then we have to be willing to do whatever God asks us to do to improve the reflection. We have to be willing to model gentleness in a world that is violent and competitive.

To believe that God has better things in mind for this world and wants to use US to bring it into being.

When we “get” that, when we understand that the Kingdom of God is at hand in THIS world, in THIS life and that we have the opportunity to participate in bringing it into fruition in whatever little corner we find ourselves...well, that IS good news. And that IS a reason to REJOICE!

Amen.