

Third Sunday in Advent  
Luke 3:7-18  
December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
The Rev. John Forman

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John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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This morning we lit the rose candle; the third of the special candles we light during the Advent season. We call the candle "joy" and we call this Sunday "Gaudete" or "Rejoicing" Sunday. From the prophet Zephaniah, we heard: "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" and from Isaiah, "...you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation."

And so, it's natural to wonder why John the Baptizer is being so crabby. Insulting people, challenging their heritage, threatening them with talk of an ax and unquenchable fire. Luke tells us that John proclaimed good tidings to the people with "many and various exhortations." We don't get to hear any of John's *other* exhortations, but none of these sound like great news, do they?

And our lectionary leaves out Luke's conclusion to this part of John's story, where Herod tosses John in prison. So we are left to either ignore the Gospel reading or to sift through it in search of joy.

Or there's a third option.

We can take a somewhat larger perspective on these readings. We can get up on the balcony and watch the action down on the dance-floor. That slightly more inclusive view allows us to see the interplay of two distinct experiences in the lives of John and Paul, and their relationships with Christ Jesus, the source of our Advent joy and God's delight.

John the Baptizer was a descendent from the house of Aaron. It's likely that he was a Jewish priest, although he worked in the wilderness and not as a functioning Temple priest. John knew Jesus before either of them was born. He also had some informed and reasonable expectations for what a Messiah or at least what a prophet should be like.

His cousin, Jesus, met few of these expectations. In fact, in just a few chapters, John will send two of his followers to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is coming or should we expect another?"

Waiting for God can lead to all kinds of questions. People burning with desire for the presence of the eternal, Fr. Karl Rahner once warned, can be overcome by terrible and dangerous impatience. History is full of people who have tired of waiting for the unveiled radiance God and have chosen to try establishing God's reign on earth by force. Others impatient with the mystery of God have put all their trust in the rational human mind, not to *explain* the mystery, but to explain it *away*.

John the Baptizer has never seen anything like what Jesus is doing. And yet, perhaps because he is so familiar with wandering in the desert, John does not give in to anxiety. This is a time of tremendous sociopolitical upheaval and violence. He and other devout Jews have been waiting for a new word from God.

They have been hoping that prophecy might someday return; waiting for the day when the words that Isaiah and Zephaniah left them might become a promise fulfilled. Waiting for a movement through which their God would breath new life into the covenant and liberate them from slavery again.

They had only rough outlines of what their liberation might look like or how it might come about, but when this uncouth agitator showed up in the towns and villages of Judea baptizing people because the time had come, they were ready to listen.

Many of them were not, apparently, ready to act. At least not to John's satisfaction.

"Brood of vipers," John calls them. Not an idle choice of insult. In the ancient Mediterranean, people thought that viper babies ate through the body of their mothers at birth, killing her. John has likely chosen this image to imply that by relying on the sacrifices and work of their ancestors, by not acting on their own to give life to God's covenant, that these people were killing the

tradition of their ancestors; starving the faith of his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and of Anna and Simeon who had also recognized Jesus as the Anointed One.

“Bear fruits, then,” John goes, as if to imply, “All of you must let your *behavior* be the noticeable evidence that God is reorienting your heart and mind. *Act* as though you were becoming aware of a larger, deeper, more inclusive understanding of the love of God and your community.”

True and lasting spiritual development engages both interior awareness and exterior action; integrates spectrums of communal values with identifiable social collectives; harmonizes inner illumination and outer right relationships.

This dynamic is not lost on John. To reorient mental and social conditioning, John challenges people to *act as though* we were more compassionate. Changing our patterns of conduct can lead us to discover our blind spots and prejudices and self-defeating thinking. In this vulnerable state of mind, body and spirit, the Holy Spirit can show up in us as new openness to others, new generosity, new life-giving energy.

Paul speaks to this same pragmatic dynamic in his letter to two women who were ministers in the church at Philippi. “Rejoice in Adonai always; I will say it again: Rejoice!” They had been arguing and so Paul recommended a change of behavior using a Greek word *epiekeia* that has no single-word counterpart in English: “Let your fairness, your kindness,” Paul writes, “your gentleness, unselfishness and moderation, your inner peace and equanimity – let these qualities be known to all human beings.”

Like John, Paul was a devout, practicing Jew, though not a priest. Paul, like John, is clear about who is the source and the power behind any genuine reform. Paul never met the historical Jesus that John knew from the womb until his beheading, long before Jesus was crucified. Paul, just like you and me, only ever knew Christ crucified, resurrected and ascended.

And so, unlike John’s vision of fire that brings judgment and destruction, Paul sees the fire of the Holy Spirit as the spiritual energy that inspires people toward greater generosity and the passion to persevere

And so, Paul can temper John’s somewhat prickly counsel: “Rejoice and bear fruits worthy of a transfigured heart *because Christ is near.*” This is the path to the Divine peace that surpasses all human awareness; the peace that keeps watch over all of our hearts and minds.

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Paul's guidance not to worry does not mean for us to be superficially cheerful or to pretend that nothing disturbs us. Distress and concerns and grief will continue to part of our human experience. Paul is reminding us to connect the nearness of God to everything that we experience – everything that frustrates or saddens us; everything that delights us or astonishes us; everything that puzzles or embarrasses us, lifts us up or makes us impatient.

We can practice giving all our life experiences to God in prayers simply because God is so near to us. In all things, the nearness of the God of hope and peace allows us to practice a prayer life that is candid and open, tranquil and non-anxious, and always bathed in gratefulness.

And then we can watch for modest shifts in our behavior inspired by the Holy Spirit in response to our prayer. Nothing earth-shattering, just small, everyday acts of compassion: Sharing with someone who has less or none of what we have. Relaxing our desire to control and acquire at the expense of others. Using whatever power we have to move toward justice and mercy for *more* of God's children, even just a little.

Paul and John do not advocate for some one-size-fits-all approach nor do they suggest running ahead of God's grace trying to save the world. We *each* have to practice prayer and compassion in ways that work for us. And we *all* have to practice with the understanding that it is a path, not an outcome.

We pray and act with rejoicing in the awareness that God supports, undergirds and inspires our practices. We pray and act with joyful trust that God knows us intimately and hears us. We pray and act joyfully and gratefully in the recognition that we are immersed in God's life-giving nearness. Even as we wait, the Holy Spirit gives us the courage to act, the humility to clean up our missteps and the joy that comes from experiencing unconditional love that can never be taken from us.

And "as we progress in this way of life and in faith," as St. Benedict wrote in his Rule, "we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

Gaudete, then, rejoice, and bear fruits worthy of a transfigured heart. Because Christ *is* near.

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