

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
3rd Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Today we lit the candle of joy. In a season of purple, we light a pink candle radiating the joy that awaits us in God. We hear words of joy from the prophet Zephaniah. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart...The Lord your God is in your midst...He will renew you with his love.”

The prophet Isaiah promises that “with joy you will draw from the waters of salvation.” He tells the people to “ring out your joy. For the great one is in your midst.”

Paul counsels the Philippians to “rejoice in God always.” Don’t worry, he says, the Lord is near.

And then comes John the Baptist. His words do not sound so joyful. The people come to him to be baptized and he shouts at them, “You brood of vipers!” I have to wonder: why do the crowds seek out John the Baptist? In the other Gospels we learn that he is a bit of a fringe character. He dresses weirdly, he eats locusts and wanders alone in the desert. This is not a guy you would expect people to flock to for wisdom and advice on good living.

And yet they come. We are told in Luke’s Gospel today that crowds of them come to be baptized by John. Even the tax collectors flock to hear John’s words and to be immersed in the waters of baptism. He doesn’t greet them with warm words of joy. He yells at them. He warns them that something has got to give. They can’t stand on their identity as Abraham’s children or hide behind their traditions. John warns the people that it isn’t enough to presume that because one is a child of the church, or a good citizen, or a person of status that one is secure before God. These are harsh words. So why do they keep coming?

They come because they know the truth. They know that something is wrong in their world, that something has to give. We know that truth, too. We know that something is wrong in our world. We know that we are bitterly polarized and locked in our own ideologies. We fear for our children's safety at school and in movie theaters. We watch as our planet heats up to dangerous levels. We live with a racial divide that hurts us all. We know deep down, just as those crowds that flocked to John's side knew, that the state of the world around us is precarious.

I think that's why those folks from all walks of life longed to hear John's words, even as hard as they were to hear. I think it's why we come back week after week to this table, even as hard as it is to face the ways we have fallen short of God's dream through the weeks. We know the truth of the brokenness around us and we long for God's vision of a world free from suffering and violence and hatred.

John does not mince words because these are important words of truth, and they are the key to our joy. The joy he offers us is a different way. It is not the way of succumbing to the cynicism of the world. It is not the way of shaking our heads in disgust with one another and checking out. It is not the way of holding on to MY way against all others. It is not the way of despair. It is the joy of companionship with God who will transform our hearts and minds.

John doesn't talk about transforming the whole world. He talks about inner transformation for each of us that will offer the world a word of hope. This repentance, the inner transformation that John points to is the joy of freedom. What we hear in John's words this morning is that we can turn in another direction to find joy. We don't have to hoard, or cheat, or hold on to things so tightly. We can let go of the past and become a new creation. Our lives are not ours to engineer. Our lives are meant to be lived in companionship with God, who offers us a different way. The way of love.

What is this way? The crowd asks John over and over, “What then should we do?” John doesn’t tell them to take the whole world in their hands and change it. That is beyond any of us. He tells them to change themselves. The tax collectors can’t change the whole corrupt system, but they can be honest in all of their dealings. The crowd can’t eliminate poverty, but they can share what they have with the cold and hungry. The soldiers couldn’t end Roman occupation, but they could do their job with integrity and not abuse their power. No hoarding, no skimming, no extortion.

John tells it like it is. And even after his strong words the people stay. They stay because they know that, strange as he is, strange as his ways are, strange as his call to transformation is in a world of selfishness and conflict, his words are in fact, Good News. Good news, welcome news for a world that can feel like it is spinning out of control.

The good news is that we can change direction. We can repent our self-interest and hardheartedness and move onto a path of right relationship with God and one another. We can share in the joy of expectation because the Messiah is near. The one who is more powerful is coming among us, is here now, and promises to soften our hearts of stone. We can’t take on the whole world, but we can make space for God to enter into our lives and change us. We can open our hearts to hear a different voice. We can, with each act of love, each moment of compassion, each act of truly seeing our neighbor, with each act of hope against the cynicism of our day, we can continue to hold the door open for the coming of the one who is more powerful.

What then should we do?

In the words of St Paul, let your gentleness be known to everyone. Try not to worry but instead turn to God in pleading and thanksgiving. Let God know your needs. Let the joy of God's alternate vision of hope and reconciliation change your hearts and minds.

And so let us pray: Come, Lord Jesus and renew us with your love. Amen.