

Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018,

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12:2-6); Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent; it is called “Rejoice Sunday” when we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath. However, our Gospel lesson with John the Baptist calling the crowds a brood of vipers doesn’t seem to have much to do with joy.

Zephaniah and First Isaiah were both prophets who lived in difficult times. Zephaniah lived during the reign of King Josiah who was considered one of the righteous kings of Judah (640-609 BCE). However, he rose as a prophet before King Josiah returned the people to the worship of God. Before that happened Josiah’s reign was marked with corruption, injustice and idolatry. Despite the darkness of the times, Zephaniah called the people to rejoice, not because of what was happening in the nation, but because of what God would do and bring about. The joy was an expression of longing for God’s reign and mercy.

First Isaiah lived in Judah during a time when the Assyrian Empire had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and had threatened his own nation. Due to failing leadership the people would lose their way and be threatened from within. But Isaiah’s hope and joy would be in the LORD their God. His joy was in the LORD, who was LORD not only over Judah but over the nations.

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Philippi from prison. Although he was in prison he was filled with joy because of his relationship with God through Christ Jesus. The Christians in Philippi were in conflict. There were those who disagreed with Paul and taught a different version of the gospel. They were isolated from the wider Roman world. And within their own community there was a power struggle between two women leaders Euodia and Syntyche. But to Paul more important than their troubles was their life together in Christ Jesus their Lord.

So in other words, joy is not the same as happiness, when everything is going our way. Joy is a result of a conviction and longing for what God has done and will do. Joy is based in hope.

Returning to the gospel reading for today John the Baptist called the people to prepare themselves for God’s reign. Interestingly, the people who responded to him were not only Jews but Roman soldiers. They knew they were living in evil days, and they yearned for better days. But they had to start with themselves. They were called to share with those more vulnerable than themselves. They were called to do their own work and be satisfied, not constantly seeking more. The soldiers were called not to abuse their power and in the process become part of the dark power of the world. But sharing, working and using power rightly were only preparatory acts. They would need a spiritual transformation.

It is this spiritual transformation that the Apostle Paul talks about from prison. Our future is not dependent upon what the powers of the world do. Our future depends upon what God does in Jesus Christ our Lord. Once a person accepts this reality in faith, we become new people. We are able to be gentle and humble. We are to let the love God found in Christ Jesus dwell in our lives, affecting our relationships. This doesn’t mean we don’t care about our society, but it means we don’t have to be like those who use power to force others. We live by the power of God’s love that has changed us. We have been changed because “the Lord is near” and ever present.

When troubles come, and they do come, we are called to pray for a resolution. Paul says, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” As

we lift our concerns to God we can be thankful that God's love will be always present. God's presence will give us a sense of peace through the most difficult of times. This is how Paul and other people of faith can remain joyful in the most difficult of situations.

So when life seems to be growing worse, we must remember that our hope is not in ourselves but in God who loves us and the world, and God will act. We must remember to continue to yearn for the world as God intends it to be, where there is enough for all, because all people share, work and use their own limited power and not for self-gain but for the common good. And as we yearn for God's world to emerge, we must continue to pray with thanksgiving seeking it, hoping for not only our own spiritual transformation, but for the spiritual transformation of all.

So rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!

Amen.

I propose to show that biblical joy is not the same thing as happiness and is not dependent on external circumstances, but instead dependent on a deep and abiding faith in God and God's promises, and that we as faithful people are called to prepare for God's reign by being righteous people who seek and long for God's reign in God's world and in our lives.

The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Old Testament

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

The Response

Canticle 9 Page 86, BCP

The First Song of Isaiah *Ecce Deus*

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely, it is God who saves me; *
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, *
and he will be my Savior.
Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing *
from the springs of salvation.
And on that day you shall say, *
Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;
Make his deeds known among the peoples; *
see that they remember that his Name is exalted.
Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, *
and this is known in all the world.
Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, *
for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

The New Testament

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord 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.

The Gospel

Luke 3:7-18

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.

In preparation for this coming Sunday's worship, please pray this coming Sunday's Collect of the Day and read and reflect on the lessons assigned as printed below

The Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Micah 5:2-5a

You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,

whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

The Response

Canticle 15 Page 91, BCP

The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. *Amen.*

The Response

Psalm 80:1-7

Qui regis Israel

1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
stir up your strength and come to help us.

3 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

4 O LORD God of hosts, *
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

The New Testament

Hebrews 10:5-10

When Christ came into the world, he said,

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God'
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The Gospel

Luke 1:39-45(46-55)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

[And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."]
