

3rd Sunday Advent C 09

December 13, 2009

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We wait for the arrival of our King, yet our King near, He is in our midst. He is here among us just as he promised in the readings from today. Rejoice, O Israel. Do not fear, O Zion. The Lord, your God is in your midst. Or from Philippians – Rejoice in the Lord always, The Lord is near.

Like all prophets, the prophet Zephaniah writes about the coming destruction of the people of Israel because they fail to listen and follow the commands of Yahweh. Over the centuries God had given them rules to heed, kings to follow and prophets to listen to. Yet they continue to fail to do the simple tasks Yahweh asked. They people failed to trust God would provide so they hoarded their wealth. Now they were being cheated by their larger nations which surrounded them, oppressed by the countries who continue to bully them, so they feel as if God has forgotten them and has left them.

Yet here Zephaniah offers the people of Israel a word of promise, a word of hope as they continue to live in exile. As they languished in oppression longing for the day they would return home, God sent his prophet to bring them a word of hope. Reminding them that in spite of the circumstances, the Lord their God will rejoice over them and He is near. Only to have the Lord himself then speak, proclaiming all the things the Lord their God would do. “I will remove disaster; I will deal with oppressors; I will save; I will change their shame to praise; I will bring you home: I will make you renowned.” It was the Lord their God who did all these things and more as He rejoiced over them.

John the Baptist also comes with words of warning and word of destruction.

John did not mince words, he spoke plainly and right out loud. “You brood of Vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

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John is often remembered as the last of the prophets of old, cut out of the cloth like the Isaiah or Ezekiel or Elijah. They came speaking the words of the Lord clearly so they would be understood. Shape up you people of Israel or else. You have two choices; to follow and obey the Lord your God so you might live long and prosper in the land He gave your ancestors. Or God's righteousness judgment will come upon you.

Words from the prophets often made them popular with the crowds while at the same time they became dangerous and a threat to the rulers. But it was clear, the words the prophets spoke were from Yahweh and the people needed to listen and follow. Yet they did not always know how to follow or what to do. Because the political and religious leaders lead them astray and culture it's self offered an easier alternative than always feeling like you are swimming upstream against the current.

John likewise with his message of baptism and repentance was both a breath of fresh air and a troublesome warning. Yet for whatever reason the people, rich and poor, religious and secular, the powerful and the insignificant alike came out from all over the region to hear him. So the crowds came looking to be inspired, looking for a fresh word and the good news. They found them in John, then when they were stirred and moved to action when they heard John proclaim, 'bear fruit worthy of repentance' and they wondered what that meant or what it would look like.

Most years at this time in the Advent season we focus on the person of John, his mission and calling as the voice in the wilderness, the one sent to prepare the way for Christ. Yet sandwiched in between two apocalyptic predictions describing the trees bearing bad fruit and the chaff from the granary being burnt in the unquenchable fire are words of hope, words to hold on to, instruction about something we can do as we await the arrival of our Savior.

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As I prepared for this Sunday, I will admit verses 10 to 14 were ones I have overlooked in the past. But this year they stood out for me and the question the different groups asked John kept ringing in my mind. The crowds began by asking the question; 'what then should we do?' John replied, 'if you have two coats you must share with anyone who has none, or whoever has food must do likewise.' Then the tax collectors asked; 'what then should we do?' 'Collect no more than the amount required of you' said John. Lastly the roman soldiers also asked; 'what then should we do?' John answered, 'do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and to be satisfied with your wages.'

In other words instead of John just beating them over the head with laws and rules and condemnation for their past sins, he offers them the baptism of repentance and counsels them to be changed, to live life differently. John instructs them to do the ordinary and the everyday – share, play fair and do not be a bully. Or we could insert the words and instructions of Jesus, those of the greatest commandment. 'You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.'

Let's be clear, these are not radical words of instruction. In fact they are plain old, everyday ordinary advice we all should have learned in kindergarten. As we look around the crowd we find the ordinary and everyday people one would expect to meet as we go about our normal everyday life. There are the poor and the unnoticed, the business owners and their employees, there are the government workers and the soldiers. They live in the cities and the small towns and rural settings where we live. People and places that test our fortitude and determination to remain faithful to our beliefs. For we also live in

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a culture which encourage us to hoard, to cheat, to grab all we can and to look out for ourselves.

These are the same people John was surrounded by. The crowds of the poor, the riff raff with little to offer anyone, the tax collectors who were despised for profiting on the backs of the neighbors and the soldiers who extorted and took advantage of the vulnerable. To these John says, 'bear fruit worthy of repentance, that to share, to play fair and do not bully.'

In doing so John did not condemn the lowly and poor crowds, the outcast tax collectors or the despised soldiers who in that culture would have been excluded from participating in the joy at the coming of the Messiah. Here John lifts them up and proclaims that when the Savior, the Messiah comes all will be included. To them and to all people John proclaimed the good news.

Even as ordinary and mundane as John's instructions are, we get a glimpse of what it means to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Like the crowds, we have not been condemned but lifted up, we have not been excluded but offered the opportunity to be included, we have been given a chance to bear good fruit, to be gathered into the granary.

So John also answers our question when we wonder; so what do we do? John instructs us to do something; to share, to be fair and to not bully others. While these simple things may not appear to help us in life, they promise us a gift the world cannot give us. These simple tasks of sharing, being fair and not being a bully do grant us the peace that surpasses all understanding which will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus until he comes again. So rejoice and give thanks for the Lord is near.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael

He is among us creating joy in the midst of fear, rejoicing amid the sadness.

In John Irving's novel *The Cider House Rules*, later in the movie of the same name, the head doctor, Wilber Larch helps the many young people celebrate amid sadness. The novel takes place in a fictitious orphanage called St. Cloud's, located in rural Maine. It's an old-fashioned sort of place in which the children bed down in dormitory rooms, their bunks arranged in long rows. Each night, Wilbur Larch, reads to the boys a chapter from a Charles Dickens novel and then turns out the light. Then, in a somber and resonant voice, Larch announces to them, "Good night, you princes of Maine, you kings of New England."

Those abandoned children are, of course, princes and kings of nothing. Yet Dr. Larch treats them as though they're royalty. His steady, affirming presence in their midst gives them confidence and hope.

Zephaniah comforts the despairing people by saying, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst," a God who "will rejoice over you in gladness." We all could use someone to rejoice over us.

Every so often in the novel, one of the children disappears from the dormitory. This means he or she has been adopted. That's good news for the child but a source of sadness for the orphans left behind, who must deal with numerous losses. Whenever an orphan disappears for that reason, Dr. Larch has another bedtime saying that goes something like this: "Let us be happy for Homer Wells. Homer has found a family. Good night, Homer."

It's another way of rejoicing over them. Dr Larch gave them the opportunity to rejoice with and for the one who left, the one who found a new family, he gave them something they could do to rejoice amid their disappointments.