

Advent 3 (C)

December 13, 2009

Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:7-18

We used to have a small hand-made ceramic bowl with beautiful, deep blue glaze that sat on a shelf in the dining room. Whenever small items showed up around the house that could be part of a game or a toy, but we weren't sure what it was for, it would go in the bowl. Or sometimes I might have a good idea about what game it came from, but heaven only knows where that game is now—so it would go in the blue bowl. Often there would be this predictable sort of conversation. What's this for? I don't know. Does it look like part of that game the kids were playing with? Maybe. Let's put it in the little blue bowl. Last time I looked there was an interesting collection of odd little plastic things in there.

So, what's it for? Sometimes, in some seasons of life, it seems that life itself asks that question about us. What are we here for? Perhaps we feel in our gut that there has to be some purpose. We're not here just to take up space, or for something as ordinary and mundane as eating and sleeping and going about our daily routines. It can't be just to serve as small cogs in the vast machinery of western civilization.

Our first two scripture readings for this morning suggest a surprising answer. We are here to rejoice, to delight in the goodness of God, to enjoy every expression of God's faithful, saving love. The apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice." The prophet Zephaniah says, "Sing aloud... shout! Rejoice and exult with all your heart..." Zephaniah wants God's people to give no thought to propriety or moderation or what the neighbors might think. Raise the roof with your rejoicing, because God has taken away every judgment against you and God's purposes for you are good.

It's beautiful! And it's enough to make me wonder: Did John the Baptist not get the message that God has taken every judgment away? Because John the Baptist says to the people, "You brood of vipers! You children of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John's words have a hard edge to them, enough to make us wince, or maybe just wave him off in disbelief.

To tell the truth, there's a part of me that wants to cringe every time I hear John the Baptist. He sounds way too much like every street-corner preacher I've ever seen, yelling angry denunciations at everyone walking by. I do believe John has something important to say to us, but it is so hard to hear him. John wants to get our attention. But I'm afraid what most of us hear

sounds more like, “Angry God! Angry God!” When I hear John say, “You brood of vipers,” I don’t hear him speaking to me. And you probably don’t either.

But he is. John does not look at the world through rose colored glasses. Instead, he recognizes the nearly-infinite human capacity for self-deception, to convince ourselves that everything is really just fine with the state of our souls. But it’s not. That’s part of the sad truth of being human. We can do things without thinking that hurt others and hurt ourselves. We don’t automatically love God with our whole heart and love our neighbor as ourselves. We don’t naturally look with compassion and concern to the poor and needy. But we can still assume that God must be pleased as pie with us.

And I think that’s why John yells. He wants for us to pay attention to our lives, to realize that the choices we make and the actions we take, they all have consequences. Most of all, John wants us to take sin seriously. Not other people’s sin, but our own—our own failures to be generous; our own failures to put the needs of others before our own convenience; our own failures to live with integrity.

There’s just one thing to do, and that’s turn to God, to open our hearts to God. That’s what “repenting” is. And John wants his listeners to understand that religion is no stand in for repenting. If religion were going to make the human family better, it would have worked by now. That’s why John says, “Don’t say, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ God can make children of Abraham out of rocks!” And to us I’m sure John would add, “God can make Lutherans out of rocks too!” Being Jewish or Christian, being Lutheran or Catholic or Baptist, being Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu is all irrelevant. None of it is able to wipe away sin or heal a human spirit or restore our relationship with God.

But making children of Abraham out of rocks isn’t the only thing God can do. God is also able to forgive sin. God can make beloved children out of sinners like us! When relationships are broken, God can heal them. When God’s people repent of their sin and turn to God, God can give life to a whole new future for us. That’s why Zephaniah calls on Israel to rejoice and exult with all your heart. That’s why the apostle Paul calls on the church to rejoice, and again I say, “Rejoice.” Because when our relationship with God is left up to us, we are dead in the water. But with God, all things are possible.

This amazing good news cannot truly be heard by people who are smug and secure in their own goodness and virtue. But for everyone who knows they fail to live completely as God would wish, who are all too aware of the limits of their patience and generosity and compassion, this is truly the word of life: With God all things are possible. God is able to forgive our sin our wipe away

our guilt and restore our relationship with God, so that we can live with God now and forever.

Because this is what we're for: to live with God, and to rejoice in that astounding, breath-taking gift. During these weeks of Advent, while we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in Bethlehem, we are also opening our hearts to prepare our whole lives to receive Christ in every way he comes to us. He comes to us today in bread and wine. He meets us in our prayers, to give us full assurance that we are his beloved children, that our sins are forgiven. He comes to us in the word of scripture, to speak his healing word to us and call us to follow him in his way of compassion and service. And we open our hearts to prepare our lives to welcome Christ also when he comes as risen and victorious Lord, to finally gather all of God's beloved into the eternal embrace of God. And in such an amazing promise, our joy overflows with wonder! Thanks be to God. Amen