

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, C
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
December 16, 2018

You just gotta love John the Baptist. He's the best hellfire-and-brimstone preacher in the whole New Testament – though a few Old Testament prophets were wilder-- and once you get past his intense style, there truly is good news in his preaching.

You gotta love John's colorful language—it's satisfying, without being profane. "You brood of vipers!" is a phrase you can use surprisingly often. While shaking your fist at careless rush-hour drivers or a flock of scooters cruising heedlessly down the middle of the street... "You brood of vipers!" You can use it just about any time you're listening to NPR or watching the news. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!" Because it does always seem to be the vipers who get the most media airtime.

I've never actually encountered a real-life brood of vipers, but my mother-in-law once did. It was over 30 years ago when Aaron's parents bought the piece of land in rural Arkansas where they planned to retire. The house and yard needed some work, so both Bill and Pat having grown up on farms, they pitched right in. Pat always tells about one day when she turned over a paving stone along the front walk, and there beneath it was a writhing mass of little tiny baby copperhead snakes. It was literally a brood of poisonous vipers. So what did Pat do? She lifted up her work boot and stamped right down on them, and she didn't stop stamping till all of their young lives had ended. Yes, they were God's creatures, but they were also venomous, and Pat had no intention of letting those little viper babies grow up and mature on that piece of land they were working so hard to cultivate.

John the Baptist's calling was to work at stamping out at least some of the poison that had infected the beautiful world God is always cultivating. John was preparing the way for the Messiah, who would be the next stage in God's unfolding plan to transform all earth in the direction of compassion and justice and peace.

I love how practical John's preaching is here in Luke's gospel. Instead of grand pronouncements, we get an idea of how people like you and me can prepare the way for the Savior. John aimed his attack at the personal kinds of sin that can poison the human family, what one pastor calls "small-scale injustices that can turn a society sour." (NT Wright) But to flip that observation, these are also the places where people who determine to add their energy to the good, and who apply holy perseverance, can really change the world. Some days when we get frustrated at the vipers behaving badly, we might get to thinking there's nothing we can do, but that's just not true. There's always a way for us to act in good faith and be part of God's reign of justice.

John urged people, “Start right now to get your lives in line with the Messiah. Start now to live the kingdom way. Make it clear God has turned your priorities around.”

“What shall we do?” the crowds asked. John said, “Give up greed and selfishness. If you have more than enough, share with those who don’t. If you’re lucky enough to have two coats, then one of them belongs to the poor.” *Hmmm, there’s something to think about.*

“What should we do?” asked the tax collectors, notorious for bilking extra money when they came around to collect. “Don’t overcharge or cheat people,” John replied. “Sure, everybody else does it, but not you. You are a people set apart. You answer to a higher authority. Doing business in an honest way is your witness to God’s character.” *Something more to think about.*

“What should we do?” the soldiers asked. “Don’t abuse your power. Don’t threaten or intimidate or bully anyone, even though you can. God gave you power not to serve yourself, but so you can serve others.” *Still more to give us pause. How do we use the power God gives us? What actions do we take, however small, to contribute to God’s work of justice?*

And this is just a start. Because the Messiah is always leading us beyond mercy to lasting justice. Beyond kindness into the way of pure love and generous compassion that comes straight from the heart of God. The Messiah will never be finished rearranging our lives or rearranging this universe. And that’s good news. The best news of all. There will always be a way for us to participate in this reign of love that Jesus Christ brings to earth.

During these weeks of Advent, which American culture calls the “holiday season,” it seems like a lot of people are just searching for a little bit of happiness. On dark, chilly days, we dream of candlelight and a shining tree, a few friends to be with, a few moments of family harmony, some meaningful gifts shared with those we love. These are the best things our culture can imagine for the holidays.

But God wants to give us so much more. God wants to give not just happiness but true joy—which exists independent from the ups and downs of our emotions or fortunes. The joy God gives is cosmic and eternal. God’s joy roots us in a goodness that is so deep we cannot fully understand it. God wants to give us the means to rejoice in all circumstances. And by that I don’t mean pasting on a smile or forcing some kind of merriness. I mean that even in the midst of anxiety or loneliness or sadness, we are able to find a calm center, a source of peace, that grounds us in God’s goodness.

It’s good to remember we are not the first people of faith to deal with frustration or discouragement as we try to live out God’s good purposes. We are not the first to wonder about the world’s direction, or even be afraid for the future. Our reading from Philippians was written for Christians who had begun well, and had journeyed well, but now seemed to

be having second thoughts. There was conflict in their little congregation, and they were starting to chafe at the cost of living an honest and courageous life every day. Being witnesses to God's character felt like too heavy a task, and some were thinking about giving up.

But Paul encouraged them to "stand firm in the Lord" and really hold onto the joy that is found in God. Paul's steady, loving, wise words are one of my favorite passages in all scripture—I can't even count how many times I've printed these words out and posted them around as spiritual encouragement for myself. Today they speak so beautifully:

*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
minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:4-7)*

"Rejoice in the Lord": hold fast to the joy that is found in God. We have a choice where we direct our attention, and when we pay attention to God's goodness, we will never exhaust the deep wealth of love that Jesus is. And this love is for us. It could be enough, this Advent, to linger with this simple, joyful message: *I am God's beloved child. I belong to God, now and always. Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus my Lord. Divine love upholds me, now and forever.*

"Let your gentleness be known..." Paul says. Let God gentle you in times of stress or fear. Let the worries we all have be shaped into prayer, in a spirit of trust and hope. Let your challenges find their proper place in the loving perspective of your lifelong and eternal relationship to God.

And let God's peace guard you. I love that word – may God's peace *guard* you. Protect your hearts and your minds. Preserve you and keep you, close to the One who loves you more than anyone, and loves you forever.

As each one of us lives out the challenge of being Christ's person, getting into the spirit of God's reign of justice, love and peace -- may the God of all peace abide with us, gentle us, guard us, and give us joy. In Jesus' name, Amen