

3 Advent C - 13 December 2009  
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18  
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The church is decorated with greenery, trees and wreaths. I imagine there are a lot of churches that look like ECR does right now. The bare evergreens that surround us await the festive decorations of Christmas. Christian communities worldwide await the coming of the Christ child. They await the one who is to be born again in Bethlehem. They also wait expectantly for the Messiah's return in glory. They wait for the coming of God's kingdom on earth. On a special wreath candles are lit weekly. First one. That's hope. And then a second. That's peace. These candles, grows shorter. Christmas Day appears just that much closer. A third candle is lit today. It symbolizes the gift of joy. It is once more the third Sunday in the season of Advent.

Advent means many things to many different people. For some Advent is a time of preparation. This is what the people in Zephaniah's time were called to do. Most biblical scholars believe that the prophet Zephaniah writes in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B. C. As a prophet, Zephaniah is warning the people that God has noticed their adulterous and profane ways. They are perverting their faith, their religious practices. They are participating in the religious practices of the nation of Assyria.

Zephaniah calls the people to repentance. He tells them that the day of the Lord is coming. A day of calamity and destruction is at hand. The humble and lowly will seek the Lord and be saved. They will be hidden from God's fierce anger.

Zephaniah's warning evokes a sense of foreboding and doom. The people must repent says the prophet. They must repent and prepare for only God knows what! That doesn't sound very joyful does it? In fact, most of us might find this pretty scary. But there is joy to be found in the concluding verses of the prophet's message. Joy is found in the expectant hope of a renewed Israel. Zephaniah points to a time in Israel's future when God will gather the lame and outcasts together. God's presence among His people is affirmed. The people are being reminded of God's preference for the lowly, the oppressed, and the

disenfranchised. Zephaniah tells these people that disaster will no longer plague the nation. God will right the injustices Israel has suffered. Their shame will be changed to praise. Now this is joyful news!

Isaiah's song echoes this Advent theme. Like Zephaniah, Isaiah also offers predictions of destruction and ruin. But he also offers predictions of the Messiah to come. Predictions of God's saving grace. Listen to these words! Isaiah tells the people of Israel to shout out loud for joy! Their deliverance is at hand! "The Lord, your God is your stronghold, your sure defense and savior!" Isaiah is reminding the people that God is present with them. And so once again there is joyful news.

Even the apostle Paul sets forth a celebratory tone. I personally don't see Paul as being a man known for his jovial nature. But Paul is calling for joy!

The underlying paradox here is this. In the midst of his call for rejoicing and joy Paul is writing to the Christians in Philippi from prison. Paul speaks out of his own pain and suffering to beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, who are plagued by differences in doctrine and leadership. Yet, even from prison, Paul calls these early Christians to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" With prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. God's peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. These words may sound a lot like the Grammy winning song of 1988 by Bobby McFerrin *Don't Worry Be Happy*. That is not what Paul means. He is directing the Christians in Philippi toward true joy and happiness. God's peace found in Jesus Christ.

With just a little effort these reading elicit a lot of good feelings. Hopefulness! Expectation! Anticipation of the good days to come! Each conveys a sense of joy. This is a joy found in the presence of God and a peace that only God can give. For some people, who like to run to the lighter side of life, myself included, this is appealing. And that's okay. But just as Christmas is more than presents or tinsel, there is something much deeper at work here.

Today's gospel passage brings us back to reality. It points out that Advent is more than hopefulness, joy and anticipation. On this Sunday in Advent every year, a familiar character arrives on the scene, John, the Baptizer. John, the proverbial wet blanket shows up calling people to accountability. Wearing the camel hair clothing of a prophet, eating wild locust and honey, John's voice is heard crying in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" "Make straight the highway for our God!" "Repent!" John takes the prophecy of the coming Messiah so seriously that nothing short of a complete turning around, a complete change of heart will do.

John calls for repentance in realistic, tangible ways, through acts of generosity and unselfishness. "You're a tax collector," says John, "be honest." "You're a soldier don't resort to extortion. Be satisfied with an honest wage." "You have two coats give one away!" "Give it to your neighbor who has none." John is telling the crowd to act with compassion toward the less fortunate. Love your neighbor. Be honest. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Show forgiveness and mercy. This is bearing good fruit worthy of repentance. John reminds us to do likewise.

"There will be a day of reckoning," says John. The One whose sandals John feels unworthy to tie, the Messiah is coming to sort the wheat from the chaff, good fruit from bad. "The ax is lying at the root of the tree."

Humph? "The ax is lying at the root of the tree." That indeed sounds grim. But is it? Consider the words of 2nd Century theologian Tertullian. "Is not the good news of the gospel, to hear that a proper way to prepare [for] the Advent of the Humble Servant [Jesus] is to let the divine ax cut off our greed, self-indulgence, egoism, hypocrisy and the like and [to] throw them into the unquenchable fire of God's judgment?"

Some people find themselves absorbed in the glitz and glitter the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season. So much so that they skip right over the season of Advent. They comb the malls trying to find the perfect gift for that special someone. Do they think about spending some time talking to Mrs. Jones next door? She's alone you know. They wait expectantly for presents on Christmas morning. But do they wait for the Christ child to be born once again in their hearts? They wait eagerly for the joyous gathering of

neighbors and family. But they forget to wait for the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom. Shopping, presents and family gatherings are all wonderful things that's true. But don't miss the true meaning and joy of the Advent season.

In today's uncertain economic times there may be fewer presents under the tree. Many people are experiencing the harsh realities of our country's economic downturn. Jobs they thought of as secure are suddenly gone. Others are victims of the mass unemployment epidemic that holds this nation in its grasp. Still others are serving our nation on foreign soil, leaving a worried family behind. All of these things serve as grim reminders of a broken and hurting world. A world that is not as God created or intended.

Today there is good news and it is this. True joy and the peace of Christ exist amidst life's calamities and hardships, in times of deepest despair. As followers of our Lord and Savior you and I, understand that true joy doesn't depend on the right card, the right wrapping, the right gift. True joy does not come from Neiman Marcus or other high priced specialty stores. True joy tells us that we are not alone.

As members of the Body of Christ we face the challenges of today's world in the loving presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Peace tells us that we are going to be okay. We are okay because he is here.

This joy, this peace is a gift from God. It is the most precious Christmas gift ever given or received. It is God's unconditional and steadfast love. It is Emmanuel. God with us in sorrow or joy. God with us in illness or wellness. That is the true joy to be found not only this Sunday in Advent but every day. It's ours to share with our friends up the street, our neighbor down the block. The Spirit of Christ working in us helps us to reach out our hands in love to those around us, like us are experiencing the pain and brokenness of this world.

As we await Christ's return, you and I find ourselves doing everyday small acts of self sacrificial giving, acts of love. These are the signs of God's joy and peace coming into the world ushering in God's kingdom today. Here and now. It is ours to share with the world. Thanks be to God.