

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year C)*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 judgements 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.*

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 axe 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.

Today's lectionary passages are a curious blend of contradictions. On the one hand, we have the prophet Zephaniah calling us to sing, rejoice, and exult over the joy we have in God being in our midst. On the other hand, we have the prophet John the Baptizer calling a bunch of people with chips on their shoulders a brood of vipers! What a contrast! On this third Sunday in Advent, when we light the pink candle to represent joy, it seems as though John's forceful rhetoric threatens to blow out the joyful flame!

But before we get too ahead of ourselves, let us begin with the joy of Zephaniah before getting to the ethical exhortations of John. The brief book of Zephaniah takes up little space in your bible. Of its three short chapters, Zephaniah spends most of his time warning the people of the day of the Lord and telling them that they better "straighten up and fly right" because the Lord is in their midst. Fear is rampant and the people of the Lord hear of the need of repentance hundreds of years before similar words come from the mouth of John the baptist.

However, the book of Zephaniah does not finish on such a harsh tone. Rather, it ends with today's lectionary passage in which the prophet calls the people to take heart and rejoice because God's ultimate destination is not away from us in angry avoidance but in our very midst in steadfast love. We are left with a song that the people are called to sing in which they rejoice that God has redeemed and is indeed redeeming them from their brokenness and sinfulness.

The joy that the people are called to is not to be found in their self-righteousness; rather, the joy to which this song calls them is rooted in the hope of God that overcomes any distance that is placed between them and God as a result of their sin. Simply put, we are to rejoice because God has saved us! We are called to exult and sing because God is in our midst and is gathering us home even as God makes his home in our arms.

It is important here to pause and remember that the people to whom the book of Zephaniah was written had undergone significant social and political trauma. Their social trauma came from years of being in exile, taken away from their homeland and having their families separated and lacking in basic food and water, the necessities of life. Their political trauma came from the embarrassment of being used as pawns in the global chess match being played by the global powers of the Babylonians and other world forces.

This hopeful word from the mouth of Zephaniah was a much needed oracle in which the people were called to trust that, despite having much evidence to the contrary, God had *not* forgotten them and God was coming in their midst to save them. Though our social realities are somewhat different from those of the Israelites of the seventh century B.C.E., we do have reason to associate with their need for hope in the midst of pain, suffering, and violence.

Fear is rampant and we need hope. This much was true for the Israelites listening to Zephaniah and this much is true for those of us that heed his message this morning. We have no shortage of things to fear. A quick look at the evening news reminds us of at least a couple dozen things to be afraid of on any given day. Now, that being said, it is good for us to be reminded that fear, in and of itself, is not always a bad thing. Fear is a natural human emotion that, when processed in a healthy manner, is used to keep us safe from genuine harm. However, when fear is used to manipulate masses of people, it is a very dangerous and powerful thing; just ask the Jews in World War II Germany.

The real question is this: are our actions rooted in fear or in hope?

For example, an action rooted in fear is refusing to admit any muslims into this country. An action rooted in hope opens our doors to the stranger among us as Jesus did.

An action rooted in fear is a church refusing to do anything differently because it “we’ve never done it that way.” An action rooted in hope is a church embracing change by remembering that God is in their midst no matter what they do or don’t do.

An action rooted in fear is hoarding every gun with huge magazines capable of plowing down dozens of people in a matter of seconds. An action rooted in hope is addressing the alarming difficulty in finding affordable mental health care in this country.

Zephaniah would have us ask ourselves, why are we doing what we are doing? Are we doing what we are doing as a response to fear or the joyful hope we have in God being in our midst?

If Zephaniah calls us to joy and hope, John the Baptist gives us some concrete ways to embody it.

John the Baptist called people to repentance to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. Now, when we think about the word “repentance,” we often think primarily of a philosophical, mental exercise in saying or praying “I’m sorry.” However, anyone can say “I’m sorry;” to do that is a rather empty exercise that requires no real sacrifice or change. True “repentance,” in the way preached by John the Baptist, is a literal “redirection” or “turning” in which we change our perspective and see things in a different way or, specifically, the way God would have us gaze. Another way of putting it is that true repentance is admitting the places in our lives in which we are looking in the wrong direction, away from the path to which God calls us.

In the beginning of today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke, John gives the massive crowds a generic call to a baptism of repentance. However, the crowds are not happy with that generic proclamation. Instead, they want some more concrete instructions. How similar are we in our hope for concrete answers? Don’t we all want to know more about what true repentance is?

So the crowds ask him, “what should we do?”

To some he says, “If you have more than two coats, you should share your excess with others.”

To others he says, “If you have much food, do likewise.”

Such wise rhetoric even sparks the curiosity of the tax-collectors, of all people, and they ask, “what should we do?”

“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you,” he said.

Waiting in the back for their turn with their hands patiently held in the air, the soldiers ask, “and we, what should we do?”

“Do not extort anyone. Be satisfied with your wages. Let your yes’s be yes and your no’s be no.”

The joy we are presented with in Zephaniah, we are told to embody in concrete ethical ways by John the Baptist. You want to repent and embody joy? Then play nicely with one another. Share with one another. Love one another. Don’t be mean to one another.

Basically, John the Baptist would have us embody joy by reminding us of the things we teach our children. It is ironic though, that although adults teach children to do these things, us adults are often the first ones to forget them.

So, I will join you all in being reminded about some concrete things we can do this season to embody the joy to which Zephaniah calls us and John the Baptist is calling us to turn to. This passage reminds us that often the most important question we can and do ask is “and we, what should we do?”

- First of all, let us be kind to one another. Let us see one another as beloved children of God and not as enemies or strangers. Let us remember that “keeping Christ in Christmas” is not done by saying “merry Christmas” instead of “happy holidays” or putting up a manger scene in front of a court house. “Keeping Christ in Christmas” is done best by respecting one another fully and treating others, no matter what they look or act like, with dignity and kindness. Take the slip of paper that our young disciples handed out and fill it out; remind yourself of ways you can embody joy!
- Secondly, instead of complaining about the little things (which is an act rooted in fear), let us return a portion of that which has been blessed to us (which is an act rooted in hope and joy). Do you have a lot of food in your pantry that is never going to be used, why don’t you do a little housecleaning and bring it to the food pantry? Do you have more than two coats (as I know I do!), then bring one here to the fellowship hall and we’ll donate them to Maureen’s Haven or leave them by the Food Pantry for people who need them.
- Thirdly, when you see a stranger on this island, someone you don’t know, especially someone who doesn’t look like you or speak like you, look them in the eyes and smile. Acknowledge their presence and greet them with warmth and kindness. You have no idea the impact that could make in their day.
- Fourthly, there is a great need for the guests of Maureen’s Haven to have basic toiletry items. Marianne Baird was kind enough to set up a donation box for us in the fellowship hall and I invite you, the next time you go to the store, to pick up a few extra toiletry items, especially travel-sized ones, and place them in the bin. I am told that they have a specific need for feminine hygiene products.
- Another thing you can do to embody the joy of God being with us is by giving a KIVA gift card as a Christmas gift to a loved one and inviting them to donate as part of the SIPC KIVA team. With a simple \$25 gift card, your loved one can search potential borrowers in economically depressed areas of the world and give the gift that keeps on giving. I am giving a KIVA gift card to my mother, my father, my sister, and my grandparents this year and I invite you to do the same. This is a great reminder to each other of a concrete way to help the strangers among us and away from us.
- Finally, consider joining us this Wednesday afternoon as we go to Southold Presbyterian Church to provide dinner for the homeless guests that will call that shelter home for the evening. Join us in eating and spending time with those who are marginalized by society, who John the Baptist would have us turn

to. If you are interested, just see me or another member of our Maureen's Haven team during the coffee hour.

Friends, so much (hopefully good!) theology comes from this pulpit. But may we never forget that good theology is not empty rhetoric but fuel that inspires concrete, embodied, Christ-like actions. May we be reminded that the most important things we are called to do are concrete actions of love and kindness, the kind of actions that Jesus embodied for us and the kind of actions that John the Baptist is calling us to do.

So, have joy! Exult and sing! God is in our midst! Now, let us act like it and respond likewise!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen!